

PhD Study in the Arts and Humanities.

When do I need to start the process?

Although some PhDs in the Arts & Humanities are advertised with funding already available (see below) most are not. You need to decide what areas of research interest you and find a supervisor who shares your interest. You then, with the help of the supervisor need to define a coherent research proposal which is both novel and achievable as a PhD project. Once you have done this you can begin applying for funding - the deadline for which is May. This means you should start thinking seriously about what your PhD interests are in the autumn and have found a supervisor in time for Christmas.

How are PhDs in the arts and humanities funded?

Winning a place at a university to study for a PhD and securing funding for that PhD are not always the same thing, especially in the arts and humanities. Arranging both often requires two distinct application procedures, the first to the university, and the second to a research council or other funding body.

Two major research councils, the AHRC and the ESRC are responsible for funding the vast majority of arts and humanities PhDs in the UK. In a minority of cases, full or partial sponsorship for doctoral research is available through university scholarships, educational foundations, professional bodies or an employer. It is your responsibility as a potential PhD student to explore all the possibilities for funding your research.

See our sources of funding section on this website for further information and links. If you have the funds and no other option, it is also possible to fund yourself.

Do I need to apply directly to a research council for funding?

If you apply successfully for a place on a fully-funded PhD programme (well done!), your postgraduate research award or 'studentship' will be assigned to you directly by your university. This procedure occurs in cases where academics have attracted research council funding for large-scale research

projects which include the costs of your PhD studentship. This arrangement obviously makes life easier because it means you do not need to make a separate application for research council funding.

If your offer of a PhD place at a university is conditional on securing funding, you will probably need to apply directly to a research council or other funding body for a postgraduate award. It is worth putting a great deal of time and thought into getting your application right. Competition for research council postgraduate awards is extremely fierce and you must avoid giving the adjudicators any reason to reject your application.

Even if you are applying directly to a university for a PhD studentship, it is still a good idea to find out as much as you can about the aims and outlook of the appropriate research council. Your chances of submitting a successful application to the university will be improved if you demonstrate sensitivity to the kind of demands research councils makes on their researchers. If you are aware of particular aspects of your subject area that have a high priority within the research council, this information can help you refine your application for the university studentship.

Remember you cannot apply to a research council for funding without first having been accepted by a university and a supervisor. Although the application is in your name, the university fills out large chunks of it and sends it off.

Which Research Councils are most relevant for the arts and humanities?

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is the principal source of higher education funding in its field and prospective research students need to be familiar with its eligibility criteria. The AHRC exists to provide money for research across a broad range of specialisms, from the performing and visual arts to more traditional academic subjects such as history, literature and languages.

If your research area falls broadly within the range of subjects classified as 'social sciences' the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) would probably be the more promising source of funding. Inevitably, there are many areas of possible overlap between the ESRC and the AHRC and you need to be

clear about how several subject areas are divided between them. For example, for political history apply to the AHRC, for economic history, apply to the ESRC.

In some cases, research councils combine to fund a single PhD. For example, in areas of archaeological research which contain a substantial scientific component (such as forensic archaeology), funding is sometimes shared between the AHRC and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). In this instance, the NERC assigns resources specifically to the experimental elements of the thesis, whereas the AHRC is more concerned with the academic context of the research.

In summary: the key is to really think about the methodology your proposed research requires, as well as the broad subject area it belongs to. A consideration of both of these aspects of your research should succeed in guiding you to the appropriate research council for postgraduate funding in your subject area. If you are applying for funding after you have found a potential supervisor, they should be able to advise you on potential sources of funding - they should also help you with your application.

How do I find the right supervisor?

Finding the right academic to supervise your PhD is vital for the success of your research. This is particularly true in the arts and humanities where the relatively solitary nature of study in many subject areas emphasises the supervisor's role as the key point of contact between the student and the university. In recent times universities have developed alternative channels for postgraduates to voice their concerns if their relationship with their supervisor proves unsatisfactory. Even so, it is preferable to prevent this situation from arising by taking steps to ensure you have the right supervisor from the start.

PhD studentships which form part of larger research projects are likely to have supervision pre-assigned to them. It is still worth finding out as much as you can about your potential supervisor in advance. Doing so will improve the quality of your application to the university by allowing you to demonstrate that you have given some thought to your choice of institution. Knowing something of your potential supervisor will also provide some insurance against unsatisfactory supervision since, in practice, you may find you have a

choice of supervisor once you embark on your studies. Remember this is a relationship that must last for at least three years!

If, on the other hand, you have approached a university with a research proposal it is up to you to nominate a supervisor. This should be someone who has research interests similar to your own and with whom you can sustain a good working relationship. You should research thoroughly the subject area you are interested in and make sure you know the names of all the leading academics in that field, what they have published and in what direction their work is taking the subject. Talk to as many people as you can who have academic experience in your subject area. When the same names keep appearing you are ready to draw up a shortlist of academics that you can approach for advice about supervision.

There is no reason to think that academic seniority means a better quality of supervision. Supervision by an older, more senior, academic carries the advantages of the contacts and experience they can provide but they are less likely to have time available for tutorials. A younger academic, on the other hand, will have relatively recent experience of the practicalities involved in completing a PhD and is likely to make more time available to you - not least because your success will reflect well on them. Don't forget that, useful though your supervisor's contacts might be, it is your PhD examiners who will be the crucial referees for your future employers.

What is a second supervisor?

Most universities appoint a second supervisor for their PhD research students. The second supervisor does not carry the same responsibility for your PhD as your principal supervisor but can provide an important source of 'second opinions'. The strengths of the second supervisor should complement those of the principal in personal as well as academic terms. It is common for more junior academics to be appointed as second supervisors, allowing you to benefit from the different qualities of both.

For a PhD student, requesting a change of second supervisor does not represent such a big upheaval politically as requesting a change in your principal supervisor. This can be practically helpful if the subject matter of your research changes course significantly over time and you need some

appropriate supervision in a new subject area but do not wish to change your main supervisor.

How do I approach a potential supervisor?

If you are called upon to name a potential supervisor, the best way to approach them is through a personal recommendation from an academic who knows you. If such a recommendation is not available, it is perfectly acceptable to contact a potential supervisor directly but you will have to work harder to establish your credentials as, even if you have read all their publications, they do not know who you are!

The best initial contact is made with a polite letter, (emails are acceptable but they are more likely to be ignored or filtered out), explaining who you are, why you are contacting them and why you think they would be the right person to supervise you. You should always ask whether they could recommend someone else who may be suitable, even if they feel unable to supervise you themselves. It is unlikely that any academic would agree to a supervision at once, so always include your contact details, including email and telephone number so that they can get back in touch with you easily.

This sort of exchange is common in academia and you will not upset anyone by contacting them so long as you are polite and unpushy. You may find that your initial contact sets off a chain reaction of recommendations! Remember though, that academics are busy, frequently away from their offices and - like anyone - are intolerant of their time being wasted.

Be patient and make sure you leave plenty of time to establish contact with your potential supervisor before you submit your final application to the university (and research council where necessary). A supervision is a big responsibility for an academic but potentially very professionally rewarding. They will want to know what it is you will bring to their group of postgraduate researchers and be reassured that you are equipped to last the distance.

How do I write a research proposal?

If you're applying for a PhD in the arts and humanities you should assume that you will be asked to write a research proposal, at least in part, since individually led research is still the norm in most subject areas. Even if you are applying to an established research project, the nature of arts and humanities subjects means that you will probably be expected, as a part of the university application procedure, to explain how your particular research would develop the basic propositions of the overall project.

The keys to writing a strong research proposal are:

- to formulate a precise, interesting research question; this may take the form of a hypothesis to be tested against a specific set of criteria or a more open-ended inquiry.
- to establish the relevance and value of the proposed research question in the context of current academic thinking
- to describe and evaluate the data or source material your research requires
- to outline a clear and practical methodology which enables you to answer the research question
- to suggest what you hope to discover at the end of your research and what new areas it might open up
- to demonstrate that your research will not take longer than three years
- to explain why you are qualified and capable of conducting the proposed research
- to set out why the institution and the supervisor you have selected are appropriate for your research
- to show sensitivity to current research aims in higher education funding, so far as these pertain to your subject area
- to do the above in a concise, unambiguous and grammatical manner

One of the hardest aspects of writing a research proposal is suggesting what you hope to discover. It is not easy to know what you are going to find out before you've carried out the research! However, the people who will assess your application realise that research objectives can change over the course of a PhD, what they want to know is whether your research question is relevant academically and plausible practically.

Supervisor input

The more input your potential supervisor has in writing the research proposal, the stronger it is likely to be. Academics are familiar with the conventions demanded by research councils and scholarship committees and will have a better idea than you of the criteria which determine the allocation of resources. Your potential supervisor can also advise on the appropriate sources and methodology for your PhD proposal; two areas in which long experience in a subject area is particularly valuable. Having said this, it is still perfectly possible for a prospective PhD student to write a successful, research award winning proposal independently.

I want to do a PhD but the university says I need to do an MPhil. first.

This is normal procedure in the arts and humanities. All students are initially registered for an MPhil and are then asked to 'transfer' or 'upgrade' to full PhD status once they have demonstrated their research is of PhD standard.

Each university has its own procedures for transfer of status. Generally speaking, as a student, you will be required to submit a piece of work as a pilot study, usually between one and two years into your PhD. This study will be assessed by your supervisor and second supervisor who will then decide whether to recommend you to the university for upgrading. If your upgrade is not successful you remain entered for the MPhil degree.

Completing a PhD requires a sustained commitment and sometimes students discover it is not for them after a year or two of study. In this sense, the MPhil represents a useful 'stopping-off point' where students who do not complete their PhD research can still gain a useful qualification.

Although it can be a distraction at the time, the upgrade procedure has the advantage of forcing PhD researchers to gather their thoughts and produce some work! This sometimes helps to provide much needed focus.

International students do not generally qualify for UK Research Council funding and may be required to submit their own research proposal to the people from whom they wish to get funding. The input of a potential supervisor is recommended if it is available.

What will I have to live on?

Life as a postgraduate student requires financial restraint, but research council maintenance grants for arts and humanities students have improved considerably in recent years.

In the year 2008-9 full time PhD students funded directly or indirectly by the AHRC or ESRC received an annual tax-free maintenance grant of £12 940 (outside London) or £14 940 (inside London). These awards are reviewed annually. Fees are also paid directly to the university.

Details concerning maintenance grants are available on the research council websites.

How can I boost my maintenance grant?

Being a full-time research student is equivalent to doing a full-time job (the ESRC specifies 37.5 hours per week with 8 weeks of holiday as the minimum number of hours annually its award holders are expected to spend doing their research). Therefore research councils have set limits to the number of additional hours full-time postgraduate students can spend in paid work, including teaching, during the semester. The AHRC specifies 6 hours per week as a maximum, while the ESRC says that only a 'small amount' of paid work per week is permitted.

For further details see information contained in the research council websites.

There are four principal ways in which PhD students can raise funds above the level of their basic maintenance grants.

1. Additional allowances from research councils.

Most research councils, including the AHRC and ESRC, provide limited funds to their award holders to cover the cost of additional research training, fieldwork and attendance at conferences. These allowances are normally paid directly to your institution which is responsible for distributing them to you according to strict rules laid down by the research council.

If you are disabled or are the sole carer of a young dependent you may be entitled to a supplementary allowance to your maintenance grant to help with additional costs incurred as a result of your postgraduate study.

Details concerning additional allowances are available on the research council websites.

2. University specific grants and bursaries.

Individual universities are sometimes able to make additional grants, bursaries and hardship funds available to research students who meet the eligibility criteria. These awards are usually conducted on a competitive basis.

For further information on availability of such awards visit the websites of individual universities.

3. Teaching

Many PhD students supplement their income and improve their CVs by taking on limited teaching responsibilities at their universities. Teaching typically involves working with undergraduates in tutorial groups, or supervising in laboratory or fieldwork.

For further information on teaching see the next section 'Will I be required to teach?'

4. Part-time casual work

Research students can choose to boost their income by taking on part-time casual work. However, research council restrictions on working hours apply, especially during the university semester.

For further details see information contained in the research council websites.

Will I be required to teach?

Teaching is not compulsory for any PhD student. However, it is quite possible that opportunities for teaching will arise in the course of your studies. Apart from supplementing your income, teaching is also valuable work experience that will improve your chances of finding a job in higher education.

Teaching as a postgraduate student typically involves working with undergraduates in tutorial groups, or supervising in laboratory or fieldwork. According to research council rules paid work, including teaching, cannot exceed more than a limited number of hours a week including preparation and marking. Payment is at an hourly rate (which should also include the preparation and marking). Some universities do not allow PhD students to take on teaching commitments in their third year of study.

What support is available to me if I take on some teaching?

Until quite recently the answer to this question would have been 'not much', and, in practice, the experience for postgraduates doing teaching is still likely to vary widely between universities and departments.

However, improving the quality of postgraduate teaching in higher education is moving up the government's agenda and this is reflected in many universities offering qualifications in postgraduate higher education to research students with teaching commitments.

Will having a PhD help my job prospects outside academia?

A PhD is first and foremost an academic research qualification. If you wish to work in an area not closely related to your research specialism, whether inside or outside academia, then you should think very carefully before doing a PhD. The desirability of a PhD does not, in itself, outweigh the three years of relevant employment experience.

Having said this, if you are in possession of a PhD then, aside from proving your academic capability, you will have developed a wide range of generic skills that are very attractive to potential employers. Universities are increasingly keen to encourage students to develop these skills and many offer a range of training opportunities to enable them to do so.

A selection of transferable skills belonging to the successful PhD student in the arts and humanities would include:

- designing a research project using the appropriate research methodology
- thinking innovatively and critically
- digesting and synthesising a wide range of written material

- analysing and interpreting of a variety of data sources
- formal writing skills
- oral presentation skills
- computing and technology skills
- bibliographical skills
- ability to organise time and prioritise between different tasks.
- enhanced language skills

Despite the undoubted range of skills that can be learnt while researching a PhD, it would be unwise to undertake any postgraduate research without a genuine liking for your subject area. This is essential to getting you through the difficult times when it seems impossible to believe that your PhD will ever be finished!

Do I need to live near my university?

Yes. In general, universities stipulate that research students must live in close proximity to the institution and this is also a condition of research council funding. Prolonged periods of absence from the university for fieldwork or other reasons need to be specially arranged.

The reason for this is to ensure that the relation between research student and institution does not disintegrate through lack of personal contact, threatening the completion of the PhD. In practice however, there is often room for negotiation; so long as there is a good reason for you to live at a greater distance than normal from your university, you may be able to arrange do so.