



The
British
Psychological
Society

Postgraduate Research in Psychology

A Guide

CONTENTS

- 1 **Type of Postgraduate Research Degrees**
- 3 **Funding for Postgraduate Research Degrees in Psychology**
 - Research Councils
 - Institutions
 - Charities
 - Commerce
 - Schemes for Overseas Students
- 7 **The Application Timetable**
- 8 **Finding a Place**
 - Will you have the necessary qualifications?
 - What do you want to do?
 - Where do you want to do it?
- 9 **Doing PhD Research**
 - Is there a recipe for Successful Supervision?
 - Teaching Responsibilities
 - Monitoring of Progress
 - Viva
- 12 **Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG)**
- 13 **Research Board: Support from the BPS**

This booklet has been prepared by members of the Research Board to guide prospective postgraduate research students through the relatively unsupported task of securing a place, and hopefully funding, for anything from a Masters degree in Research Methods through to a PhD.

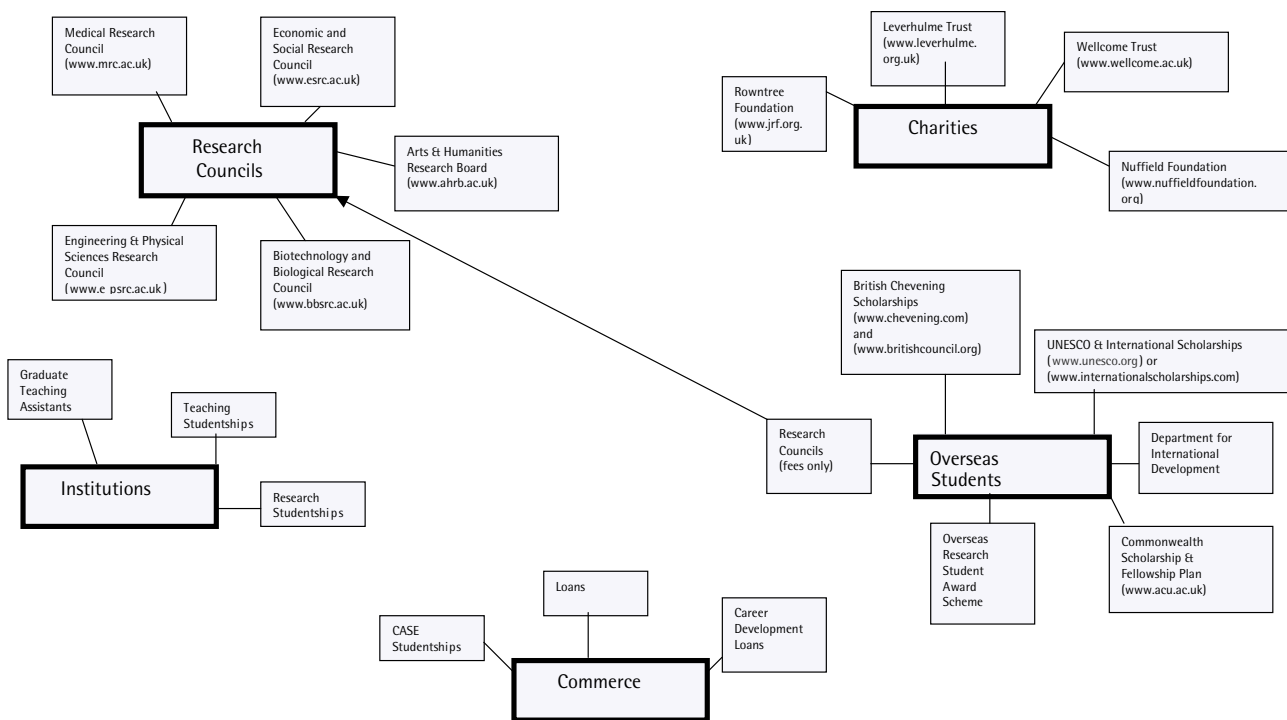
A dedicated part of the Research Board pages on the main Society website (www.bps.org.uk) provides an additional resource to accompany this booklet. It includes up to date information which may have changed since the publication of the booklet.

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Types of Postgraduate Research Degrees



The precise range of postgraduate courses and research degrees that are available varies from one department to another, as does the work these involve (to some extent). However, broadly speaking, there are **four** basic types of research degree. **Masters** degrees (**MSc in Research Methods/MRes**, or **MPhil**) usually take less time than a **doctoral** degree (**PhD** or **DPhil**), require work at a less advanced level, and may involve direct instruction. Whilst these degrees are qualifications in their own right, they are often regarded as preparation for work on a doctoral degree (see the section below on the **1+3 model**). Doctoral degrees involve carrying out a programme of independent research over several years, and are generally seen as the primary qualification required to become a lecturer in psychology. More details on each type of degree are given below.

MSc in Research Methods (or MRes)

These are usually full-time courses of 12 months duration, though in some cases it will be possible to take them on a part-time basis over two years. A distinction can be made between Masters degrees ‘by research’ and those with a larger taught component. The taught (and typically assessed) components includes different types of research methods in psychology and the statistical/computing techniques relevant to

those methods, plus an individual research project and dissertation, carried out under the supervision of a member of academic staff.

Those weighted more towards independent research are usually only assessed on the student’s dissertation. Students are expected to undergo instruction (via elements of the Department’s taught MSc course where this exists) in areas that are especially relevant to their research project, but the dissertation work will be the focus of their efforts. Reflecting this, the dissertation is typically longer than the taught MSc dissertation (up to 30,000 words), and will be expected to include an extensive literature review plus a report of a single study.

Whilst a reasonable breadth of coverage of material/topic matter is required for an MSc course to gain Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recognition, their focus is typically on the specific areas of research expertise that exist within the host Department. This is commonly a factor in students’ choices of where to apply. ESRC recognition is important, since it enables students who complete the MSc to apply for ESRC support to carry out a Doctoral degree in that or any other Department (see the following sections on the **1+3 model** and on **funding**).

MPhil

The MPhil degree is at the opposite end of the spectrum to MSc courses, since the focus is exclusively on independent research (though in practice students may be allowed to attend taught classes if this seems useful). Assessment is based solely on a dissertation of up to 50,000 words which reports an individual project and related literature review, defended at an oral examination (the 'viva').

The duration of study for an MPhil is usually less specific, reflecting its more independent character, but there is typically a requirement for a minimum of 12 months' work full time (24 months' part time). Students are not allowed to submit their dissertation for examination within this period (except by special dispensation) since they are deemed unlikely to have carried out enough work to meet the required standard. There is also a corresponding maximum period of study (usually 24 months full-time), by the end of which the dissertation must be submitted (though it may be possible to extend this if circumstances merit it).

PhD/DPhil

The format of the Doctoral degree is similar to that of the MPhil in that the focus is on independent research, carried out under the supervision of experienced members of academic staff. The scale of the exercise is much larger, however, encompassing a coherent programme of research (a systematic literature review and usually a minimum of three studies), and production of a thesis of around 100,000 words, which is defended at an oral examination.

The intention is that study for a Doctoral degree will provide training and experience in all aspects of conducting professional level academic research. Since this involves a large amount of activity, the duration of study is typically set at a minimum of 33 months and a maximum of 48 months full time (48 and 72 months part time). As Doctoral work is so extensive, progress is typically carefully monitored. It is not uncommon for intending doctoral students to be required to register for an MPhil in the first instance, so that they can demonstrate their capabilities, only transferring their registration after satisfactory completion of a first year of study.

The 1+3 model

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the leading (though by no means only) external source of funding for postgraduate research degrees in psychology in the UK. This means that it is in a strong position to influence the shape and content of postgraduate training. Since it regards part of its remit as being to ensure that future generations of researchers and academics possess high levels of skill, it has been very proactive over the last ten years in exercising this influence. One major consequence of this has been a steady shift away from funding PhD students who only have an undergraduate qualification, since, according to the ESRC, this results in individuals acquiring a very narrow skills base. In practical terms, the position now is that ESRC will not usually award PhD studentship funding to anyone who has not successfully completed a recognised masters course in research methods (see above).

This 1+3 model (1 year MSc in Research Methods + 3 year PhD) has gained widespread acceptance amongst Departments of Psychology, and it is increasingly uncommon to find students moving straight from undergraduate to Doctoral study, though it may still happen where individuals are funded by institutions, by overseas agencies, or by themselves (it is nevertheless, still more common for more biologically orientated students to go directly onto a PhD). If you do not already have Masters level research methods qualification and are interested in postgraduate study, this means that you should start by looking at MSc courses, unless you have a very specific reason for not doing so. It also means that Departments will typically encourage first-time applicants to consider this route.

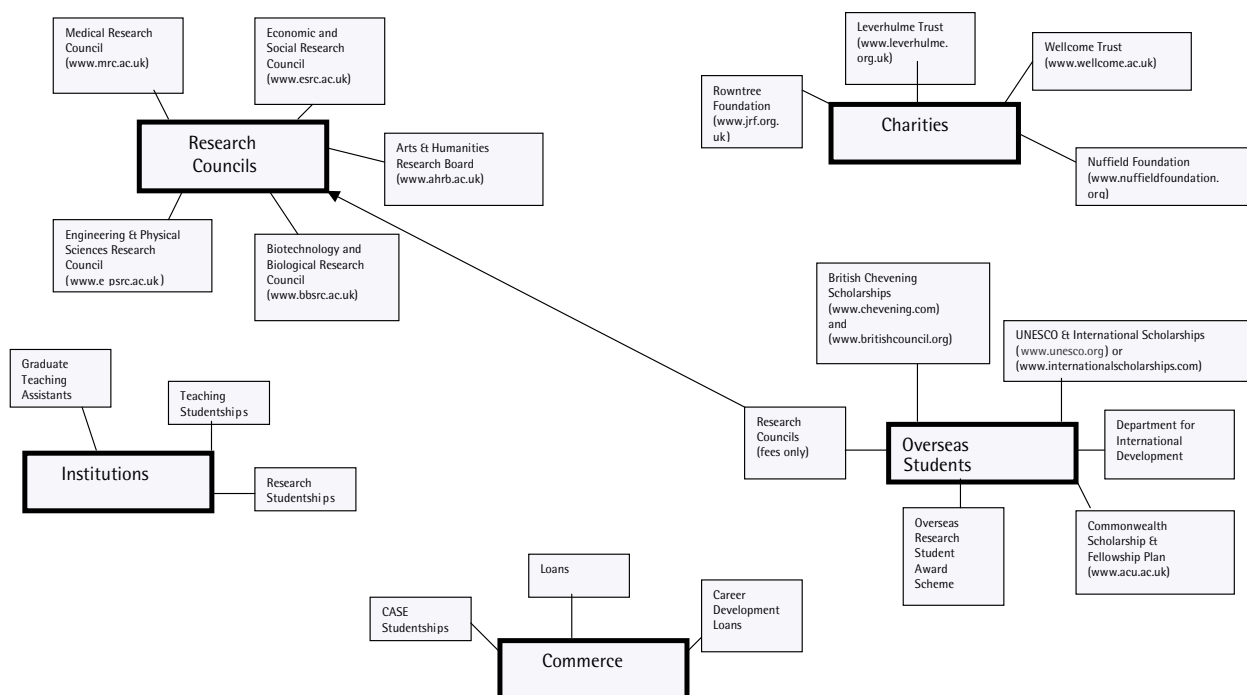
Some important points to bear in mind:

- If you are applying for a Masters course in research methods, you would be well advised to check whether it has ESRC recognition (this can be easily done on the ESRC website: www.esrc.ac.uk). If it does not, whilst a later application to ESRC for a PhD studentship is not completely ruled out, it will be much more difficult, since you will need to persuade them that you have received adequate research training. Conversely, if you have a recognised MSc, you will be eligible for Doctoral study in any department that is willing to offer you a place.

- The 1+3 system does not in fact necessarily commit you to a four-year programme of study for a PhD. In many departments it is possible to transfer from the MSc to a PhD programme without formally taking the award of the masters degree, enabling the research completed for the MSc dissertation to be used towards a PhD thesis. Three-year programmes are therefore still possible under some circumstances. However, ESRC-funded students will be expected to go through the full 1+3 programme.
- Taking the MSc in Research Methods does not commit you to moving on to a Doctoral programme subsequently. Unless you are receiving an ESRC 1+3 award (see below in the section on **funding**), taking the Masters degree provides you with an opportunity to decide whether postgraduate research is for you prior to making a decision about whether to pursue a PhD. These courses also provide you with a very portable qualification, since they are well-regarded by both university and non-university employers of research staff, and are increasingly recognised as valuable background for applicants to professional courses in educational and clinical psychology, where research skills have become a greater priority.

Funding for Postgraduate Research Degrees in Psychology

Different Sources of Funding for Postgraduate Research Degrees:



There are a number of potential sources of funding for postgraduate study, and considerable variation in the application procedures and deadlines. However, almost without exception they require the support of a host Department and a prospective supervisor. This means that applying for a place to study is the first thing that you should do. Departments who offer you a place should then be able to advise you on which type of funding it might be most appropriate to seek.

You should bear in mind that **all** sources of funding are likely to be highly competitive, and Departments may even be required to rank order their candidates in terms of which they think are strongest. For this reason, it is important to begin the application process early, and to give some serious thought in advance to the precise area in which you want to conduct research, and what questions you will try to address. Well-prepared candidates definitely stand a better chance of securing funding.

Sources of funding for postgraduate research degrees break down into four basic categories: **research councils; institutions; charities; and commerce**. There are also funding schemes aimed specifically at overseas students. Further details on each category are given below.

Research Councils

The UK Research Councils are autonomous government-funded agencies whose remit is to support research and research training in science, the arts and humanities. Each Research Council has responsibility for a different field of activity, but psychology is unusual in that the nature of the discipline makes it eligible for support from five different Councils. The downside of this is that different areas of research come under the remit of different bodies, so it is important to think carefully about where to seek funding. Things are further complicated by the fact that different Councils have different funding programmes and application procedures.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

As noted earlier, the ESRC is the main funder of postgraduate research in psychology, and covers work in cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology, social psychology and aspects of clinical psychology. The ESRC offers two principal types of

postgraduate studentship, **1+3** and **+3**, both of which provide course fees, a maintenance grant (this varies according to personal circumstances, such as age and the number of dependents – see website for more details), and a contribution to research expenses of £750 per annum.

The 1+3 awards cover the first year of training in research methods and subsequent study over three years for a PhD/DPhil, whereas the +3 awards only cover the period of study for a doctoral degree. 1+3 awards are now primarily made on a quota basis, i.e. Departments are allocated a number of awards and make these available to their own students, as they consider appropriate (subject to confirmation from ESRC). For the immediate future, a smaller number of 1+3 awards will also be available via an open competition, but each department is only allowed to submit one application. +3 awards are currently all subject to open competition, but there are plans to introduce a quota system for these as well by 2006. The deadline for both types of competition is the beginning of May each year. The application forms are lengthy, and require detailed outlines of proposed programmes of research (especially the +3 form), so it is important to start work on preparing these early (ideally by the start of April at the latest).

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)

The EPSRC covers engineering-related work on human factors, especially in the context of human-computer interaction. EPSRC operates a completely different scheme to ESRC, based on what are called **Doctoral Training Accounts**. Institutions whose academic staff are successful in obtaining EPSRC grants for research projects are awarded a certain amount of funding per unit of research grant, which they are required to put towards training postgraduate students in areas under the EPSRC remit. As with the ESRC quota awards, it is up to each Department (subject to EPSRC confirmation) who these funds are awarded to. Departments should be able to tell you when you apply to them whether they are likely to have EPSRC-funded studentships available. At the moment, the EPSRC does not require students to undergo a 1+3 programme, so it may be possible to move on to a Doctoral degree programme without taking a masters in research methods first.

The Medical Research Council (MRC)

The MRC funds work in biological psychology, neuropsychology and clinical psychology, especially where this has a bearing on medical issues. The MRC operates a **Doctoral Training Account** scheme of the same kind as the EPSRC (but, unlike EPSRC, this is calculated on the basis of institutional income and not just Departmental). As for the EPSRC, the MRC does not require students to undergo a 1+3 programme, so it may be possible to move on to a Doctoral degree programme without taking a masters in research methods first.

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)

The BBSRC funds research in physiological and biological psychology, especially where this has wider biological significance. Postgraduate studentships are awarded to departments on a quota basis, similar to the ESRC 1+3 scheme, depending on past success in obtaining funding and in training postgraduates. The BBSRC does not require students to complete a MSc prior to undertaking a Doctoral degree.

The Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)

The AHRB funds research that has a bearing on social and cultural issues. It is currently moving towards research council status, and therefore regards itself as having a responsibility for training postgraduate students in these areas. AHRB studentships are awarded under a competition system similar to the ESRC +3 awards, which also has a deadline of the beginning of May. As with EPSRC, AHRB currently has no 1+3 requirement (though students with a masters degree may stand a better chance of securing funding). Unlike ESRC, which welcomes studentship applications tied to wider research programmes, AHRB requires the Doctoral work it supports to be fully independent.

Other research council schemes

It is quite common for other agencies, such as Government Departments, to ask the Research Councils to administer studentship funding for research in areas of particular priority. Whilst applications for such studentships typically have to come from Departments themselves, staff will not always be aware of these one-off schemes, so it may be useful to watch out for advertisements about them, and draw these to the attention of prospective supervisors. Adverts for schemes of

this kind will usually be placed in the *Education Guardian* (Tuesdays) and *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) between November and January. If Departments have been successful in obtaining funding under this type of arrangement, they may advertise for candidates on www.jobs.ac.uk, or in *The Guardian*, *THES*, the Society's *Appointments Memorandum* (issued monthly).

Institutions

While Research Council funding is probably the best kind (because things like conference attendance are usually built into the award), there are other sources of funding available if either you prefer a Department which cannot get Research Council money or if your funding proposal has been turned down. Increasingly, many Departments make their own studentship funding available, as a means of attracting high calibre postgraduates. The number of awards, level of funding, type of degree they are available for (i.e. Masters or doctoral), and application procedure vary substantially from one institution to another. Increasingly, some Departments have teaching studentships or graduate teaching assistants who are funded on the basis that they take on a certain amount of undergraduate teaching (usually seminars and workshops) while they do their PhDs. To apply for these you will normally need to submit a proposal (usually put together by the student and potential supervisor) and/or go to an interview. Also, research staff at universities gets funding for their research and sometimes they will get research money to employ a student to work on their project. Occasionally this is simply another type of funded PhD but often this will be a research assistant position where the person will work on the project part-time while doing a part-time PhD part-time in a related area. Applying for these posts is like applying for a job and you will almost certainly have to go to a formal interview. Other sources of funding may be available in the university, for example, some universities give bursaries to their ex-students to do PhDs.

Advertisements for such awards will usually be placed early in the year on www.jobs.ac.uk, or in *The Guardian*, *THES*, or the Society's *Appointments Memorandum* (issued monthly), as well as in some regional newspapers. It would also be sensible when applying to departments to enquire whether there are likely to be institutional awards available.

Charities

A large number of charitable organisations provide studentship funding, though as with institutional awards, the precise details are hugely variable, and are often further complicated by entitlement restrictions based not just on your qualifications and area of work, but on geographical criteria such as where you were born, where you did your first degree, or where you are planning on studying. Moreover, whilst some organisations have large sums of money available (e.g. the Wellcome Trust), others have very limited amounts and may offer either part funding only, or else just one or two awards each year. Academic staff in departments you are applying to may know of some applicable schemes for your work, but it is rare for anyone to have particularly comprehensive knowledge, so this is one area where it may pay for you to engage in some legwork. There is a central compendium of charitable organisations and what they fund published each year, and copies of this are usually held by university careers services and research offices. Getting access to this will be a good place to start. Alternatively, you could use www.funderfinder.org.uk to help you identify potential sources of charitable funding.

Commerce

The main Research Councils (ESRC, MRC, EPSRC, BBSRC and AHRB) all run Collaborative/Industrial (CASE) Studentship schemes. These CASE Studentships are awarded to UK-based industrial companies who wish to support postgraduate research in areas relevant to their operations. The company defines the research project and establishes a partnership link with an eligible academic institution. It must also be willing to make a financial contribution (this varies for each scheme) to the Studentship award. The award usually includes a placement at the at the company's premises to enable the postgraduate to gain some work experience in an industrial or commercial environment. Full details of the CASE Studentship schemes can be obtained from the relevant Research Council websites.

A number of commercial organisations provide studentship funding in the same way as charities, under sponsorship schemes. These may have the additional proviso that you commit to working for the organisation for a period of time after receiving your postgraduate degree. Students considering work in the area of occupational

psychology are perhaps the most likely to find schemes applicable to them, but it is worth asking at your university's careers office to see if they know of other possibilities.

The other source of commercial funding is loan schemes. After having built up debts from student loans during your undergraduate degree, self-financing by borrowing more money may seem a less than attractive proposition. However, many postgraduates do take out loans, especially to support themselves through one-year Masters degrees in research methods, on the grounds that this investment is likely to repay itself by opening up other possibilities. Different organisations will have different schemes available, but most of the high street banks administer government-funded career development loans, which have low interest rates and extended payback periods. To qualify for a loan, the course in question must relate to a job (this seems to be interpreted fairly loosely in practice), and not last for more than two years. In addition, candidates must not be in receipt of any public or institutional award.

Schemes for overseas students

Most of the schemes detailed above are available only to UK nationals, though EU students may apply to the UK Research Councils for **fees only** awards. The exception is institutional awards, which are usually open to suitable applicants from any country of origin. There are also a number of schemes aimed specifically at overseas students:

The Department for International Development (DFID) Shared Scholarship Scheme:

A limited number of awards are available to students from developing Commonwealth countries to allow them to come to the UK to study for one-year taught Masters degrees (e.g. an MSc in Research Methods). The scheme is administered by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and application forms are available from host universities in March/April. Candidates must be under the age of 35, and must not have studied in the UK previously. Awards covers fees, maintenance and dependents' allowances.

The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan:

This provides awards under similar terms to the DFID scheme, but may also be applicable to doctoral study. Candidates need to apply well in advance through the Commonwealth Scholarship Agency (usually based in the

Department of Education) in their home country. More information is available at www.acu.ac.uk

Overseas Research Students Awards Schemes (ORSAS):
A limited number of ORSAS awards are provided to UK universities who then grant these via open competition among students who have been offered a place to study in that institution. They are available to students who are about to start a research degree, or who are already undertaking full-time research (provided they are not in their final year). The awards pay fees only, making up the difference between the home and overseas rate (though institutions typically cover the remainder of the fee themselves).

British Chevening Scholarships:
This is the collective title given to a range of awards funded by the UK Foreign Office for

postgraduate study (mainly instructional) in the UK. Selection is carried out by British Embassies and High Commissions overseas, in conjunction with the local British Council representative. Further details are available from British Council offices or at www.chevening.com and www.britishcouncil.org.

Some other international agencies, such as UNESCO, the World Bank and the European Commission, operate funding schemes, usually for students from developing countries. See www.unesco.org or www.InternationalScholarships.com for further information.

A list of international funding opportunities for international students wishing to undertake research degrees in the UK is available at: www.psympag.org.uk/main/international.html.

The Application Timetable

Deadlines for applications for postgraduate research degrees can be quite variable, but tend to be in the spring (late January to the end of April) for entry in the following October. More specific up-to-date details are available from the Research Board section of the Society's website at www.bps.org.uk

Given all that needs to be done in terms of finding a place to study and securing funding, you need to start thinking about the various possibilities earlier than this, however. The following rough timetable indicates what you should aim to do when:

<i>October/November:</i>	consideration of options/courses
<i>December/January:</i>	(depending on deadlines) preliminary contact with departments and Directors of Postgraduate Studies for advice on applications and funding opportunities, and signalling of interest
<i>January to March:</i>	(depending on deadlines) formal application for place to study, decision on whether or not to accept offers
<i>February to April:</i>	(depending on deadlines) application for funding completed in conjunction with department.
<i>June to August:</i>	notification to funders of degree result (if applying in final year of undergraduate degree); decision on funding application
<i>July to September:</i>	confirmation of intention to take up place
<i>October:</i>	start course of study.

Finding a Place

Securing a Masters or PhD place is a highly complicated business. There is a bewildering array of options and, unlike for undergraduate courses, there is little in the way of central organisation bodies, such as UCAS, to help cut through the complexity. Not only do you have to find a topic that you will want to spend up to the next three years of your life investigating and a supervisor who you trust to guide you into the world of academia but you also have to secure the money to allow you to do this. However, hundreds of people every year manage to negotiate this process and secure funded Masters and PhD places.

Will you have the necessary qualifications?

Before you start hunting for a PhD place, in particular, it is important to be aware that it is becoming increasingly the case that PhD places are awarded to people who have Master's degrees or first-class honours degrees. It is becoming increasingly rare for people with second-class degrees and below to get a PhD place without a Master's degree (and is especially relevant for those seeking funding from the ESRC under the 1+3 scheme).

What do you want to do?

For MSc courses in Research Methods, you are best to look at Departmental websites, look out for advertisements on the notice boards in your undergraduate degree Department, and have a look at the list of accredited courses on the ESRC website. As these are taught courses, and will therefore be timetabled within the Departmental teaching schedule, it is a relatively straightforward process to identify a course and its components for this kind of Masters degree.

For both MPhil and PhD courses, this is a less well structured process. The first thing to do is to decide on what area you want to study. This will constrain the search space and determine whom you need to talk to to get further information. You don't need a fully formed proposal at this stage but try to identify the area that you want to work in. It is important that you choose an area that you are interested in as two/three years is a long time to get stuck doing a boring project and often in the dark hours of your research, it is sometimes only the interest of the project that keeps you going. Also a PhD, in particular, will

place your academic career within the area that you have chosen since you will invest time and effort in building up a knowledge base and publish work in this area. It can often be difficult to break away from your PhD into other areas.

Where do you want to do it?

After identifying the topic, the next stage is to identify an institution and a supervisor who you will want to work with for the next two/three years. The most common way of getting a PhD place is through unsolicited enquiries to Departments and potential supervisors. Only approximately 15 per cent of people get a PhD post by responding to adverts in the national press (PsyPAG survey, Hatton, 1994). Many people do Masters degrees and/or PhDs at the institution where they have done previous degrees, supervised by people they already know. However, if you don't want to, or cannot do, a Master's or PhD at your current institution, a good strategy is to talk to people who work in your chosen area about departments and supervisors. These people often have inside knowledge on where you could start to look for a place, who would be a good or bad supervisor and they may provide letters of introduction for you.

As outlined previously, one of the important things to find out about any institution that you are considering is the potential for obtaining a funded place and in particular whether they are accredited to receive funding from the Research Councils (ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC and MRC). First of all, if a Department is accredited you will have a much better chance of getting funding; second, accredited Departments may have higher retention rates as Research Councils sanction Departments with poor completion rates. To get Research Council funding you either put together a research proposal with your potential supervisor or are nominated by the Department to receive an award, depending on the Research Council that you are applying for. Overseas students rarely qualify for Research Council awards (see page 4 for further details).

When contacting a potential supervisor it is essential to do your homework on the research topic, institution, Department, and potential supervisor(s). This information is crucial for

helping you to decide whether you want to apply for the post in the first place, and is also essential for the interview stage if you are short listed. Do not be afraid to ask important questions, such as those outlined in this guide. Remember that you are choosing them as much as they are choosing you. There is nothing wrong with negotiating with more than one Department simultaneously and don't worry too much about hurting people's feelings. For a Department, the decision about who to take on as a Master's or PhD student is important; for you, however, the next two or three years of your life depends on it. Also be aware that Departments will attempt to attract as much research funding; be careful that you are

not caught up in the process and are asked to accept a situation that you do not feel comfortable with (for example, you are asked to turn down the offer of an ESRC Quota Studentship to allow that funding to go to another student, as the Department feels that you are of high enough calibre to secure a Competitive Research Studentship Award).

Finally, the last piece of advice is to believe in yourself and persevere. Every year, hundreds of people are successful in securing a funded Master's or PhD place so there is no reason why you shouldn't be one of them. Good luck!

Doing PhD Research

If we hear someone say '*You won't need a PhD in rocket science to be able to understand that*' or '*you won't need a PhD in brain surgery to be able to work that out*' we normally expect to be able to stay within the comfort zone of our current expertise base for whatever demand is being required of us. Although such clichés imply that a PhD involves gaining a state-of-the-art knowledge base within a specialist subject area, of course they can only ever tell a partial story about what a PhD actually is or means. So, if you are passionate about psychology and want to familiarise yourself with various viewpoints about what a PhD in Psychology actually is before weighing up the benefits and costs of doing one, read on...

One way to find out what a PhD is, is to look at the standards set up by national frameworks. For example, in the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education gave the following descriptor for qualification at doctoral level (January 2001):

"Doctorates are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- (i) the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication.
- (ii) a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;

- (iii) the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- (iv) a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry."

Another way to find out what a PhD is, is to look at the requirements of individual institutions. Often you will find that a PhD is viewed in terms of 'learning outcomes'. The 'learning outcomes' below have been adapted from the *University of Leeds Research Student Handbook* (2000). As well as enabling you to see what areas are central to your own proposed area of research, they also enable you to start forming an idea of the ways you might be able market yourself for life after the PhD – whether you want to pursue a future postdoctoral career or chosen career path outside academia.

Research – to be able to:

- Identify original research topic to be tackled – recognise and demonstrate originality and independent thinking.
- Set research in context of previous research and knowledge, current priorities and opportunities.
- Design and carry out investigations
- Identify and access library information.
- Demonstrate practical and analytic skills

- Collect, record, and manage, analyse findings
- Critically evaluate one's findings and those of others
- Develop theoretical concepts.

Presentation and Communication – to be able to:

- present and defend research to a variety of audiences (oral presentations, posters, communicating findings to research users)
- present research outcomes in thesis and defend in viva

Research/working environment – to be able to:

- Understand ethical issues and health/safety issues, good working practice,
- Awareness of sources of funding appropriate to area of research
- Justify own research to public and funding agencies

Personal effectiveness – to be able to:

- Plan and organise research programme so as to submit thesis within registration period
- Understand and manage professional relationships
- Ability to identify own training needs
- Use information technology packages and techniques
- Manage ones career progression

Time

According to John Wakeford, a national consultant in higher education, once you have removed weekends, holidays, teaching, family and personal commitments and illness from the approximately 1,000-day allocation to do a PhD (according to a full-time three-year model), there are actually less than 500 working days to complete it! So, in Psychology, depending on the kinds of data collection you embark on, you are likely to draw on evening and weekend time. If you're studying animal learning or memory you might find yourself working solitarily in a darkened laboratory over the weekend. If you're researching with specialist low incidence populations you might find yourself travelling the length and breadth of the country at unsociable hours. Of course, the kinds of research questions you will feasibly end up being able to pursue will interact with your availability in the context of being a part-time or a full-time PhD student.

A prompt completion not only leads to career, financial and personal benefits for the student

but means that the university avoids institutional penalties for delayed submission.

The student experience

If you read through the acknowledgement section prefacing many PhD theses you gain a glimpse into the kinds of support and resources that students called on to achieve their doctoral award (such as parents, supervisors, partners, the local pub, etc.). The three-year journey of course involves a range of highs and lows.

The end product

A doctoral dissertation in Psychology can normally be expected to be in the region of 70,000–100,000 words. If this seems a somewhat daunting prospect, bear in mind that according to the *Index to Theses* database over 480,000 theses entries across all subject areas have been accepted – so know that all these people before you have faced a similar challenge and achieved it! There is a benefit in perusing a thesis early on – actually physically looking at one – to give you an idea of the goal-posts. To look for a topic relevant to your area you might want to try some of the following links:

Index to Thesis Service

<http://80-www.theses.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/>

British Library

<http://www.bl.uk/services/bsds/dsc/theses.html>

Alternatively, there are a number of very useful self help guides, including:

Murray, R. (2002) *How to Write a Thesis*. Open University Press: London

Is there a recipe for successful supervision?

To avoid making your's the kind of horror story that you might read about in the Higher Education section in newspapers, any early steps you can take in electing and applying for the right student-supervisor(s) match is essential for a smooth passage to the award of a doctorate.

With the supervisor-student relationship being just one of many professional relationships you will build on the way to the award of a PhD, it is worth thinking about the other kinds of relationships and audiences you will need to encounter. In the schedule you devise, it will be critical to include a plan of when you hope to share your ideas, findings and academic writing

and receive feedback from other students, academics at conferences and journal editors.

Supervisor-student match

Some experts in higher education research degree training view best practice as involving joint supervision between two or more supervisors rather than just one. As well as being a good practical precaution (say in terms of cover in the case of staff absence due to illness), where this works well, the set-up can offer the student alternative view points and enable supervisors to bring different topic areas to the supervision process. It has the potential to be an effective model as each supervisor has the chance to bring different characteristics, knowledge bases and skills to the process. – the way you choose your match will depend on the kind of research topic area you are choosing to focus on. Of course, one pitfall is the potential for each supervisor to leave the responsibility to others and so it is worth establishing early on with your supervisors the kinds of roles you would expect them to play, and how this might change over the course of the doctorate.

One way to promote successful supervision is to negotiate what you might reasonably expect of each other. You might find that some of the questions below help to identify topics you as student and the supervisor may want to talk about or negotiate over.

- What is the framework for supervision including arrangements for regular supervisory meetings?
- Is there agreement about the stages that the student will be expected to have completed at certain points in the research?
- What is the role of each supervisor?
- What kinds of assistance can the supervisor offer in terms of identifying a topic?
- Does the topic fall within the expertise of the supervisor?
- Can the PhD be completed with the resources available?
- Is the topic suitable for the award of PhD?
- What training opportunities are available at the University?
- Meeting student regularly and frequently at the intervals agreed at the beginning of the research programme.
- Assisting in defining topic of research – agreeing the scope of the ‘problem’ area.
- Can the project be completed within study

period?

- Is the nature of the research problem worthy of a PhD?
- Are supervisors aware of research training on offer at the University?
- Does the supervisor expect to respond promptly and constructively to submitted work?
- Stick to monitoring timetable agreed at beginning of project?
- Does the supervisor anticipate any periods of absences?
- Will the supervisor take an active role in introducing students to range of different audiences?
- Can they nominate examiners in time, so that the viva can go ahead as soon as possible after submission of thesis?
- Will the student come to supervisory meetings with a clear and prepared agenda?
- Will the student be able to maintain progress according to timetable agreed with supervisor?
- Will the student present written material in time for comment and attempt a record of work attempted.
- Is the language presentation good enough for a thesis?
- Will the student be able to negotiate a the form of guidance and kind of comment they find helpful?
- Will the student recognise supervisors have other demands on their time?

Teaching responsibilities

As well as topping up any student grant, the chance to undertake teaching responsibilities such as demonstration sessions, seminar teaching, marking, sessional lecturing is a good way to gain experience for future career in academia. However, most PhD funding agencies stipulate the maximum number of teaching hours a student is permitted to undertake in any one teaching year. An alternative model of a PhD where teaching studentships (which usually pay more than the research councils) offer an alternative way to manage the time and cost payoffs of doing a PhD.

Monitoring of progress

It is normal practice for institutions to have guidelines for the submission of an end of first year report (in the case of a full-time student) both by students and supervisors. Progress will be charted against the framework for supervision set up in the first phase of the registration for a degree. At the end of the full-time degree, or at

the end of the second year in the case of a part-time degree, normal practice requires recommendation for transfer for doctorate (rather than Master's level). Although the methods for doing this will vary across institutions, standard practice involves the appointment of a panel at a departmental or Faculty level. Methods for appeal procedures are normally cited in the Research Handbook of the institution concerned.

Viva

To ensure that your thesis meets the UK national standard, external examination is through a viva

which serves as a check that the thesis is the student's own work. Crucially, it looks at your competency in defending and talking about your research.

There are resources available for support in preparing a viva including:

Murray, R. (2003). *How to survive your Viva.*—Open University Press—McGraw-Hill.

Guidelines for the Assessment of the PhD in Psychology and Related Disciplines (2000). British Psychological Society, UCoSDA and ESRC.

Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG)¹

The Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG) was formed in the late 1960s when a group of Sheffield postgraduates got together to organise a conference aimed specifically at postgraduates. It is now a national organisation that aims to support all aspects of postgraduate work. PsyPAG is effectively the postgraduate wing of the Society and it is run by postgraduates on a voluntary basis. Any postgraduate who is studying a psychology-related course (PhD or Master's) is eligible to stand for the committee, whose membership is constantly changing as existing members complete their PhDs and advance from postgraduates to post-docs. This presents many opportunities to become actively involved in PsyPAG

PsyPAG represents postgraduate interests within the Society through postgraduate representatives on the Research Board, Membership and Professional Training Board, and within each of the Divisions, Sections and Branches. PsyPAG also has a representative in the Learning Teaching and Support Network (LTSN – now the Higher Education Academy for Psychology) and has made several presentations to the LTSN on postgraduate views about particular issues (e.g. Atherton, Wan & Bearman, 2002). PsyPAG has also conducted research on postgraduate experiences of their PhDs (Hatton, 1994) and has collaborated with the Society's Research Board to produce documents aimed at both

current and prospective postgraduates, such as the this booklet and the *How to... Apply for a PhD* article (Bearman, 2002).

Every year PsyPAG holds a conference at a UK university. In addition to providing an ideal setting for postgraduates to present their work to a friendly audience, the conference is an opportunity to meet and form friendships with other postgraduates. Studying for a higher degree can be very isolating at times, particularly if there are only a few postgraduates in the Department, and the opportunity to talk to other postgraduates who may have experienced similar problems can often help. This is one way in which PsyPAG provides a social support network for postgraduates.

Another way it seeks to create a social support network is through its newsletter, *PsyPAG Quarterly*, which is sent to every Psychology Department in the UK and contains reviews of conferences, articles on particular areas of psychology, Departmental reviews and humorous pieces. While the quarterly is designed to be a bit of light coffee-time reading it is an important means of establishing a postgraduate community and a way of publicising PsyPAG events.

The group also runs three annual workshops, designed to allow postgraduates to develop excellence in the skills of their discipline.

¹This was first published as an article in *The Psychologist*, 16(1),12-13

Workshops are held on both qualitative and quantitative methods.

In addition to these activities, PsyPAG also awards bursaries to postgraduates to allow them to travel to and present their work at conferences that might otherwise have been financially unattainable. Through this scheme PsyPAG has allowed many postgraduates to present their work at key conferences, to mix with key experts in their field and to become part of respected worldwide academic communities.

PsyPAG is actively involved then in supporting research at the organisational level, with its influence on important committees; at the social level, through the creation of a postgraduate

community; and at the practical level, by means of structures that exist to allow postgraduates to present their work, to acquire skills and to become part of important academic communities. For more information on PsyPAG, how to apply for bursaries, and how to stand for committee positions please visit www.psyPag.co.uk.

References

Atherton, C., Wan, M. W. & Bearman, C.R. (2002). Research students' expectations of joining the research staff. Paper presented at BPS Annual Conference, Blackpool.

Bearman, C.R. (2002). How to Apply for a PhD. *The Psychologist*, 15(7), 340-341.

Hatton, C. (1994). To PhD or not to PhD? The PsyPAG survey. *The Psychologist*, 7(5), 212-215.

Research Board

The British Psychological Society Research Board is committed to promoting and supporting psychological science and its applications. A core element of this is a strong commitment to providing various forms of support for postgraduate research students.

Schemes supported by the Board include:

- bursaries to assist postgraduate students presenting papers and posters at the Annual Conference of the Society;
- travel grants for visits to other institutions in the UK, Europe and elsewhere in the world;
- the award for outstanding research carried out during the completion of a doctoral degree;

- a joint award with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology; and
- a prize for the best article about some aspect of psychology written in a clear, accessible, interesting and relevant way.

As the Board is committed to supporting postgraduate research students in general, it is not necessary to be a member of the Society to submit an application under these schemes. For further information on the support schemes available and other relevant activities of the Board, please visit the Research Board section of the BPS website (www.bps.org.uk) or contact the Scientific Officer, Lisa Morrison Coulthard (e-mail: lismor@bps.org.uk, or telephone: 0116 2529510).

The British Psychological Society was founded in 1901 and incorporated by Royal Charter in 1965. Its principle object is to promote the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of Members of the Society by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge.

The Society has more than 42,000 members and:

- has branches in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales;
- accredits nearly 800 undergraduate degrees;
- accredits nearly 150 postgraduate professional training courses;
- confers Fellowships for distinguished achievements;
- confers Chartered Status for professionally qualified psychologists;
- awards grants to support research and scholarship;
- publishes 10 scientific journals and also jointly publishes *Evidence Based Mental Health* with the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Psychiatrists;
- publishes books in partnership with Blackwells;
- publishes *The Psychologist* each month;
- supports the recruitment of psychologists through the *Appointments Memorandum* and www.appmemo.co.uk;
- provides a free 'Research Digest' by e-mail;
- publishes newsletters for its constituent groups;
- maintains a website (www.bps.org.uk);
- has international links with psychological societies and associations throughout the world;

- provides a service for the news media and the public;
- has an Ethics Committee and provides service to the Professional Conduct Board;
- maintains a Register of more than 12,000 Chartered Psychologists;
- prepares policy statements and responses to government consultations;
- holds conferences, workshops, continuing professional development and training events;
- recognises distinguished contributions to psychological science and practice through individual awards and honours.

The Society continues to work to enhance:

- recruitment – the target is 50,000 members by 2006;
- services – the Society has offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales;
- public understanding of psychology – addressed by regular media activity and outreach events;
- influence on public policy – through the work of its Boards and Parliamentary Officer;
- membership activities – to fully utilise the strengths and diversity of the Society membership.

The British Psychological Society

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