

Applying for a PhD: Proposal writing and funding

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Hello and welcome, we hope you find this guidance on applying for a PhD at the University of Leeds helpful.

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I am Freya Bailes and I am the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies at the School of Music.

I am Maria Kapsali and I am the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies at the School of Performance and Cultural Industries.

In this webinar we will cover three key areas:

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- Freya: I will talk about the nature of a PhD in the UK and the different available modes of study, including researching through practice.
- Maria: I will cover the key areas of the proposal.

- Freya: And I will offer some advice on writing competitive scholarship applications.

Maria: The webinar is offered as a complement to the information provided on line, so please check our website. At the end of this presentation, you can find a list of useful links.

Slide on 'What is a PhD in the UK?' (Freya)

Undertaking research at doctoral level in the UK involves proposing and conducting original in-depth research in an area of your own choice under the guidance of a supervisory team.

Doctoral study in the UK may offer the opportunity to attend *some* taught classes as part of a training plan to support your research project. The PhD is structured around regular meetings with the supervisory team and supported by an active research culture at the University of Leeds.

In the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, the impact of research carried out in all schools within the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures at the University of Leeds was rated as either 'world-leading' or

‘internationally excellent’. Our high research ratings enable us to continue to recruit the best research staff and students, invest in our facilities and continue to build links with industry and research partners in the UK and overseas.

Slide on Mode of Study (Freya)

The mode of PhD study can be full or part time.

The University also offers a distance-learning PhD. Undertaking your project in the distance-learning mode, means you can study from anywhere, though you are required to attend relevant training sessions and progression assessment points in Leeds. The frequency and timings of these may be different for each project, so if you are thinking about distance learning, it would be worth have a discussion with your potential supervisors about it.

It is often the case in our disciplines that a PhD is researched through practice.

Slide on Practice-based PhD

A PhD by practice means that your main research question will be examined through practice.

The practice may manifest in different ways, depending on the project and disciplinary area.

In addition to the creative practice, a practice-based PhD also includes a written submission, articulating the research questions and indicating how the research is embodied in the practice.

Slide on Practice Based PhD

In this slide you can see a few examples form practice based Projects in Music and Performance.

In the School of Music, a PhD by practice may involve a portfolio of original compositions demonstrating an original contribution to knowledge and scholarship.

In the School of Performance and Cultural Industries a PhD by practice may involve the staging of performance, the creation of an installation or work in progress.

Slide on Research Proposal a

There are three key areas that we will consider in this webinar:

- The characteristics of a successful research proposal
- The different parts of the proposal document
- And the personal statement

Slide on Research Proposal b

A research proposal is a short written document that will be used by the potential supervisors and the University to assess the potential of your topic for research, your ability to undertake it and the fit with the expertise of appropriate supervisors and the School.

The research proposal is the most important aspect of your application: a competitive proposal will enable you to secure a place at a research intensive University, such as Leeds; it is likely to increase your chances of success, if you are applying for funding; and it will put you in a good stead to successfully complete your project.

A proposal needs to showcase the potential of the PhD project to contribute new knowledge to a relevant field and your ability to conduct this research.

What are the characteristics of a good proposal?

It needs to be clearly written. It is expected to set out what you intend to do, how, and why. It is expected to address an academic readership, so you need to demonstrate that you can use appropriate academic conventions. Bear in mind, however, that readers may not have an in-depth knowledge of your topic area. You need to demonstrate a familiarity with key terms, but try to avoid jargon that may alienate your audience.

It needs to be informed by relevant literature and practice (where appropriate).

It needs to be convincing.

Slide on Research Proposal

So, what should a proposal include?

The most important aspect of the proposal is the articulation of a central research question and a series of sub-questions. Take care how you phrase these and how you order them. Check that your research questions can be answered and are worth asking.

The questions need to be framed within an appropriate academic context, referencing relevant and recent literature. Make sure you show familiarity with the field you are proposing to research, especially familiarity with recent publications and projects.

The research questions, in tandem with the research context, should allow you to articulate the contribution your project is expected to make

to new knowledge. There are many questions a research project may ask, but not every answer will be original. You need to be able to identify what is original about your project and how it will eventually contribute new knowledge to an academic field. Is there an aspect in your field that has been neglected? Are you asking existing questions but from a fresh perspective? Are you proposing to look at an existing theme but from a new, and perhaps interdisciplinary angle? In other words, what makes this project original?

Once you set out the area of enquiry, you need to outline the methods you intend to use and the reasons for selecting them; why are they appropriate and how will they enable you to answer your research questions; what kind of resources would they require? Are you sure you can have access to these resources?

A timeline that demonstrates the trajectory and key stages of the research. Remember a PhD project undertaken full time lasts 3 years.

You need to sketch out a project that can be completed within this period of time.

Finally you need to provide information about yourself, explaining why you are interested in and well placed to conduct the research.

Slide on Research Proposal

Make sure you update your CV and you detail relevant academic and professional experience.

For example, one of the current researchers in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries included in their personal statement:

The research areas and skills that they had developed at MA level and how this experience related to the research proposal, as well as their teaching experience to date and a book chapter they had authored during their postgraduate study.

If you intend to research your questions through practice, you would also need to explain what kind of practice you wish to undertake, why practice is the appropriate method, and give evidence of existing

practical experience. You will also be expected to submit a sample of your existing work.

For example, one of our existing researchers, who came back to academia to undertake a practice-based PhD after 30 years of professional practice offered a narrative about why they had decided to leave 'the theatre' and explore new ways of working – towards justifying a return to practice armed with more refined tools and a robust ethics.

Another one, also undertaking practice-based research aimed to show a long-term, concerted involvement with the industry through their professional practice but also through engagement activities, such as being a member of a professional association and attending continual professional development days.

Slide 12. Scholarship Applications (Freya)

The University of Leeds offers a range of PhD scholarships.

You may also have access to other funding schemes, for example schemes that are specific to your country of residence.

Scholarships from UK funding bodies are highly competitive. If you are interested in applying:

Take the time to thoroughly read all available information and criteria for success for specific scheme;

Target your application to the scheme and the requirements of specific funders; you might want to highlight dimensions of your proposal that align with the objectives of the scheme.

One of our successful scholarship holders has this advice for applicants:

“Scholarships want to support postgraduate researchers, their research and well-being and it sets any applicant in good stead if they are thoroughly familiar with what additional support is available, can reference this support in their application and even better, speculate around how such specific support, funds or schemes can support them

and their research. All such information will be accessible online and a few hours of research can pay serious dividends around how such applications are structured. It will also be clear to those assessing applications that the applicant has done their homework, a factor that will move strongly in their favour.”

Slide 13. Enrich your application (Freya)

In support of your scholarship application, you would be expected to provide references from academics or experts in your field of proposed study. It is a good idea to share your research plans with possible referees, who would be able to comment on how your academic and/or professional credentials fit with your plans.

One of our current scholarship holders, Michele, explained that she decided to choose people who really knew her and her work, who understood how important the application was for her, but at the same time were renowned and experienced professionals.

Consider ways to enrich your profile. This may include applying for professional or academic awards; taking up opportunities to present your work at relevant events; and seeking opportunities to publish in academic or other fora/symposia.

Michele was careful to emphasize her professional experience as a composer and teacher, including prizes, scholarships, artistic residences and academic recognitions.

Marc was unusual in applying to undertake a practice-led PhD without a traditional academic background. He explained: “It was clear from the outset that my practice as a professional composer would go a long way to demonstrating the quality and impact of my work, and in lieu of any other qualifications, demonstrate my potential to complete a PhD. I also realised it was important to show that my practice was research, (...) to strengthen my research proposal to the university, and as such, choose

practice examples where there was a clear research problem and research questions that I addressed through the problem-solving activity of composition. To articulate this previous research experience, I chose examples of work such as residencies or cross-disciplinary collaborations where I had a problem to solve and where I had kept a blog or written a project progress report and evaluation that discussed what the problem and questions were, how I approached them and what outcomes were produced along with a description of impact where appropriate, all supported with links to access material online.”

Slide Preparing for a PhD in Leeds?

How then to best prepare to undertake the considerable commitment that a PhD is?

A key aspect of a PhD project is the fit with the research institution.

So, do your research on the Institution.

Try to get as much information as you can, become familiar with the University's research culture and and if possible visit us, either during an Open Day or for a research event.

Understanding the research culture is likely to strengthen your proposal and increase your chances of being offered a place on the PhD programme. Several of the researchers who are currently studying with us visited the city and the School prior to applying. So, check the Open Days and follow our events online.

The fit with the supervisors is also key. One of our existing researchers suggested that becoming familiar with the supervisors' work was also helpful and added new dimensions to the proposal. Another also suggested to look for the professional credentials of the supervisors: how much teaching and research experience do they have; are they widely published? Are they recognised by other researchers?

One successful applicant "would advise any potential PGRs to involve their potential supervisors in their application process at the earliest possible stage. Communication is key".

Another one, brought attention to the development process that is inherent in proposal writing. They said that 'while the main focus of your research will need to be firmly established, sub-questions may change/develop as you work. The research process is dynamic and organic (or should be) so there are bound to be shifts in emphasis. This will happen even as your proposal is developing'.

Ensure you have essential skills. This might include academic, language and IT skills.

One of our international PGRs described taking additional steps to prepare for her PhD, saying: "As a Colombian student, I had to dedicate time to the language. I had studied English for many years in different levels of my education, but I had never lived/studied outside Latin America. During my previous studies (BMus and MMus) I had the experience of reading articles and books of music written in English, which was very important not only for my specific research field but to develop my Academic English skills. However, I had to prepare the IELTS test for several months. I definitely recommend to practice a lot or

even to attend a course before taking the test in order to get the required score for your program.”

You may also want to think about the network of support that you would need to put in place in order to be able to dedicate yourself to the project. One of our current researchers, put it this way:

Think about how you will support yourself during your PhD: will you have a mentor outside of the department? A group of friends who care about you but not so much about the ins and outs of your research? It could be quite a big lifestyle change, but you can start planning for it early. I came to the PhD from a full time job, and I gave myself a full month between my last day at work and my first day back at university. Budget now so you can afford to do a version of this too! Doing a PhD is likely to be more enjoyable if as much of the grind of daily life can be on autopilot - if you're coming out of a job it's likely your earnings will drop by doing a PhD - plan for this, work out how you can put things in place so you're as well supported as you need to be so money worries don't get in the way of your creativity.

Finally, consider where you would like to live. Doctoral study takes a long time and it is important that you feel the place suits your needs and lifestyle.

Slide 15. Useful links (Freya + Maria?)

Here at the University of Leeds, we benefit from a busy schedule of research activities, including seminars, conferences, colloquia, and visits from scholars and artists.

These are advertised on the webpages of the relevant schools and faculties so please check these out regularly.

The key priority is to identify and contact academics you think could be appropriate supervisors for your planned research, and you can find out more about our colleagues by following these links.

Details of available scholarships will also be linked to on these pages, as well as information about postgraduate open days.

If you are planning to apply to a PhD programme, make sure that you leave yourself enough time. If you hope to apply to a funding scheme, make a note of any application deadlines: often you will need to apply for a place at your university of choice and be offered a place of study before you are eligible to apply for a scholarship.

Allow enough time - before your application to study - to discuss your proposed research with your prospective supervisors.

For enquiries relating to postgraduate research studies in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries or the School of Music at the University of Leeds, please select the appropriate email address on the screen.

Maria: Freya and I wish you every success when applying for a PhD, and for your research futures.

Useful links

Search for a PhD opportunity and funding:

<https://phd.leeds.ac.uk>

Research degrees in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries:

<https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/performance-research-degrees>

Research degrees in the School of Music:

<https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/music-research-degrees>

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Graduate School:

<https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/graduate-school>

Leeds Doctoral College:

<https://www.leeds.ac.uk/doctorscollege>

Improve your English language skills:

<https://www.leeds.ac.uk/languagecentre>

Doctoral loans:

<https://www.leeds.ac.uk/researchdegrees>