

This is a prepublication version of the following article: Hales, S., Burns, D., & Partridge, B. (2019). Getting onto a PhD. In H. Walton (Ed.), *A guide for psychology postgraduates*. London: British Psychological Society. Available at <http://www.psypag.co.uk/>.

Getting on to a PhD

Samuel Hales

University of Kent, UK

Derek William Burns

Sheffield Hallam University.

Benjamin Partridge

Sheffield Hallam University.

Author Note

Special thanks go to the PsyPAG Committee (2018-19) for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this work.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Samuel Hales, School of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NP. E-mail sth21@kent.ac.uk

Summary

Over the last decade, there has been a 25% rise in the number of students applying for doctoral-level study across the UK (Universities UK, 2017). Prior to committing to a PhD, applicants must make an informed decision as to whether working towards a PhD is valuable for them in terms of personal and professional development. By answering some of the most frequent questions asked by PhD applicants, this article aims to de-mystify common myths associated with doctoral-level study.

Introduction

For many viable PhD candidates, the prospect of applying for doctorate-level study provokes understandable feelings of trepidation. However, these individuals comprise a diverse group with different lived experiences, backgrounds, and personal commitments. Throughout this article, the authors will draw on both academic literature and their first-hand experiences to introduce prospective doctoral students to the PhD application process. This is with the aim of helping these persons to decide whether doctoral-level study proves a valuable undertaking for them in their development.

This article will first review the steps which comprise the general PhD application process, including: deciding to undertake a PhD, identifying a research topic, choosing a university, supervisor compatibility, seeking funding, application preparation, and the interview process. Attention will then focus on applicants with children, and those returning to education after a period of employment. These sections will highlight the potential challenges and concerns which prospective students may encounter throughout the application process (e.g., financial issues, childcare), and the means by which to best overcome these prior to starting a PhD.

1. The general PhD application process

1.1. Deciding to undertake a PhD

The decision to undertake a PhD is not an easy one to make. By doing this, you are accepting that you are going to commence what is likely one of the hardest, most demanding journeys that most academic researchers encounter. Should you see your PhD through to completion, you will also be bestowed with the highest degree that a person can achieve, and you will have made a valuable contribution to academic knowledge in your field.

There are several key facts here that must be overtly considered during this ‘decision-making’ stage. Listed below are three major examples:

1. **PhDs are long.** If you find your way onto a PhD course, you will be spending between three and six years working towards your degree. In this time, it is expected that you will write up a thesis of approximately 80,000 words, which you will have to defend via means of a *viva-voce examination* (a formal assessment in which you verbally defend your thesis against a panel of academic researchers in your field).
2. **PhDs are emotional.** In their investigations, Levecque et al. (2017) found that 32% of the PhD students they assessed ($N = 3,659$) were at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder owing to their studies. For many doctoral researchers, this may be unsurprising. Whilst conducting and writing up your thesis, it is likely that you will encounter various setbacks which will have a negative effect on your mental health and wellbeing. Though many universities try to combat this by creating supportive academic environments, there is still an onus on PhD students to become self-aware and resilient workers.
3. **PhDs are all-encompassing.** Typically, interviewing panels select PhD candidates who will act as ambassadors for their institution. This means that alongside your research, you will be expected to navigate the organizational policies of your

university, any job requirements, and your supervisors' leadership styles, all whilst maintaining a healthy work-life interface.

1.2. Identifying a research topic

Arguably the most important stage of the PhD application process is choosing what you would like to research. Whilst some universities offer pre-devised projects to apply onto, it is often the case applicants will have to develop their own research proposal.

To start, we would recommend devising a list of topics that you are passionate about. Ask yourself: What areas of psychology interest you? What topics do you like learning about? Once you have done this, read around each of the topics and identify gaps that a PhD could viably fill. This is a cyclical process, but by the end you will have formulated a basic idea as to what you want to study and how you plan to study it.

1.3. Choosing a university

Choosing where you want to study is typically based on what you want to study. If your research interests are broad, then PhD vacancy websites provide a good starting point for searches (e.g., www.jobs.ac.uk/phd). Here, you can find pre-specified PhD projects, as well as general doctoral programmes and scholarships from institutions across the UK. If your research interests are more specific, then it is best to approach potential supervisors directly (see below).

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a useful tool to help categorise universities with strong publication records and academic achievements. Postgraduate league tables can also be beneficial in helping to compare university rankings. Make sure to consider the caveats associated with these classification systems before using them, though (see Khazragui & Hudson, 2015).

Of course, doctoral-level study is not unique to the UK and some PhD candidates decide to conduct their research abroad. If this is the case, www.findaphd.com offers an excellent selection of articles on 'PhD Study Abroad'. Here, you can also search for international PhD projects and programmes, both funded and unfunded.

1.4. Supervisor compatibility

Most PhD candidates will have a minimum of two trained academics who oversee their projects. These *supervisors* will provide you with guidance and assistance so that you can carry out your research effectively and present your findings most appropriately. They will also support you in your personal and professional development.

Good potential supervisors will be those deemed experts in their field, who possess an excellent record of academic publications and who have seen numerous PhD candidates through to completion. They will also be individuals who set aside time for regular one-to-one meetings and who provide feedback on work in-progress.

One of the best ways to locate supervisors is through the readings that you made earlier on. Was there an author whose name appeared regularly? Is there an academic who is frequently cited in key papers? If so, locate their staff profile online, read up on their academic interests, and then get in touch to arrange a meeting.

1.5. Seeking funding

PhDs are not a cheap undertaking – most cost between £3,000 and £6,000 per annum, excluding living expenses and course-specific costs. However, there are a number of opportunities available to you to locate the money to finance your degree.

Arguably the most common source of funding are scholarships awarded by a student's host institution. Often these are in the form of *demonstratorships* or *assistantships*, whereby

you receive financial support for your PhD in exchange for academic teaching at your university. Another source of funding comes in the form of studentships from UK research councils (e.g., the Economic and Social Research Council), who will fully-fund a PhD by paying your tuition fees and providing a significant doctoral stipend (set at £14,777 in 2018).

PhD candidates also have the opportunity to finance their own studies. Several universities offer discounts to students who self-fund, and there are often more relaxed entry requirements onto PhD programmes for these candidates.

1.6. Application preparation

Once you have identified funding, you will be tasked with writing up your PhD application. Depending on which funding you are applying for, this application can vary in length from a short-form synopsis of your research to an in-depth proposal. Each funding provider will have different requirements here, though most impose strict wordcounts on their applications. As such, you have to make sure that you are concise in your writing and that you convey all the necessary information that will enable someone outside of your supervisory team to understand your proposed research.

1.7. The interview process

Following a successful application, you will likely be invited to an interview at your university of choice. These interviews are typically short in length (around 20-minutes) and provide you with the opportunity to highlight your academic potential. The interview is often split into two sections: the research proposal (in which you present your proposed research) and the interview (in which the panel probes you about your eligibility for doctoral study). During the interview, you may expect to be asked questions such as: What makes you

suitable for doctoral research? Why do you want to study at this university? How to expect to juggle a PhD and other work commitments?

From personal experience, interviewing panels tend to consist of a member of your supervisory team, an affiliate of the Graduate School, and the lead for doctoral funding within your host school.

1.8. Next steps

After your interview, the university will usually let you know within a week whether you have been successful or not in securing a place on their PhD programme. If this is the case for you, congratulations! You are now on your way to becoming an academic researcher. If your interview was not successful, your application will likely be added to a ‘waitlist’ of applicants. This means that, should any successful candidates relinquish their position, the university may ask you to fill their place.

2. Considerations when applying with a family

Studying for a PhD with a family is common in the PhD community. This next section discusses the unique challenges and considerations for those applying with a family. These challenges relate to balancing the family and PhD life, as well as the additional costs associated with childcare.

2.1. University and the childcare options

Before applying for the PhD, it is a good idea to get a feel for the university and any potential supervisors, to assess how family friendly they are. Many universities offer part-time PhD programmes which can take longer to complete, but are more flexible in terms of childcare.

Unfortunately, part-time studying is not open to all students. For example, international students need to be on full-time courses to fulfil UK immigration requirements.

When discussing your PhD proposal with supervisors, also consider talking to them about your personal situation and children. Some universities may offer discounted prices for on-campus nurseries, which can be useful when you have children under-five.

2.2. Employment / Student status and impact on childcare cost.

The average student does not have ‘employed status’, despite the expectations of universities for students to work eight-hours a day, teach (if on a demonstratorship) and publish papers. This has a deep impact on the benefits you may receive – specifically in relation to childcare – which you would be entitled to if you were in full-time employment.

On average, the weekly costs of nursery childcare are between £114 (two-year olds) and £116 (three to four-year olds) for the UK, with this increasing to between £154 (two-year olds) to £156 (three-year olds) in London (Which, 2018). Unlike those studying for an undergraduate degree, there is little help from student finance to cover childcare fees, especially if you receive a stipend. All children between the ages of three to four receive a minimum of 15-hours free childcare in term-time (school holidays not included), independent of parental work status. Any additional help to cover costs of childcare relate to the work status of lone parent or both parents. That is, to receive any further help with childcare, each parent in a household is required to work at least 16-hours per week. Therefore, due to the average PhD student being classed as having ‘student status’ and not ‘employed status’, there is no additional help with these childcare costs for those on doctoral programmes.

If you are self-funding and working part-time, you may meet the 16-hours per week criteria and so may be entitled to childcare. Each individual case may differ; therefore, it is suggested you visit www.gov.uk/childcare-calculator when considering applying for a PhD.

This site takes into consideration your personal situation and can provide an estimate of childcare-related benefits that you may receive.

2.3. Balancing your PhD and family life

One of the challenges of studying for a PhD with a family is striking a balance between these two important aspects of your life, but rest assured that this is manageable. Ensuring you have the full support of your partner or close family is important. A PhD can be challenging – being able to fall back on your family to understand and support you will help you to get over the difficult periods. Also, remember your PhD is not going to get a Nobel Prize (Hughes, 2018), so it does not have to be perfect. Similarly, you are not going to be the perfect parent all the time. Striving for perfection in either aspect of your life while studying for a PhD, is only going to lead to needless stress and worry. Unlike a normal 9-5 job, studying for a PhD is quite flexible; you make your own work plan, which works best for you and your family. Granted there may be times the PhD takes all of your time up, but this is a rare. Always make time for your family and children.

Having children while doing a PhD is not a liability, so ensure that you spend quality time with them (Jamil, 2014). See your children as an asset, giving increased drive and perspective about what is and is not important, providing a release from the pressures of the PhD (Murdie, 2014).

3. Getting onto a PhD after a break from study

For many, the idea of starting a PhD straight after an undergraduate or master's degree can be a daunting prospect. For others, it is a natural progression. Those who decided to take a break from higher education and enter the world of work can face similarly tough decisions to leave. This can include difficulties accessing journals, library services and support from

academic staff; challenges to financial stability, and the readjustment to a new working structure and loss of a daily routine.

3.1 Applying for a PhD after a break in study

One hurdle in returning to study is the process of writing a PhD application. This can appear daunting after a break in education, but it is important to know how to access help at this early stage.

Making contact with a previous supervisor or member of academic staff you have worked closely with can prove useful in developing your understanding of the application process. Previous supervisors are often very willing to help in assisting with writing your application or providing feedback on drafts.

Contacting your potential new director of studies is also essential to express your interest, begin to build a relationship, and gain support and guidance. It is important to remember that your potential new supervisor is looking to recruit a PhD student and therefore willing to provide support in writing your application too.

3.2 Accessing support materials for your application

Those wishing to return to education may have access to articles and papers that are freely available online, but may not be able to easily gain access to more specialist materials. Your potential new supervisor will be a good source of support in gaining access to these materials and may be able to advise on key texts and articles.

Some universities also offer temporary library passes or associate memberships to their library for former students, local council staff, teachers at local schools or those working in public sector roles. Access to such university provisions will be essential in writing your

application and being able to draw on up-to-date research in your specialist research area. There is usually a small annual charge associated with these services.

3.3 The application form

One of the biggest differences in securing a 9-5 job and securing a PhD is the application process. Most workplaces require you to complete a detailed application form with pre-set questions which guide you through the process of applying for the position (e.g., by encouraging you to focus on your skills and suitability for the position). With a PhD, the application process is very different.

Most universities will ask you to write a proposal for the advertised subject area or for your own research project, in which you will be expected to draw on academic literature and demonstrate your understanding of your research field. This is a very open-ended process, unlike the traditional job application. This is your chance to demonstrate your academic writing ability and knowledge. Drawing on the expertise of your potential supervisor will help. Treat the proposal like the initial stages of a lab report: include literature and some background knowledge, set out the aims and objectives of the study and consider the potential methodology. Most importantly, though, highlight how your proposal will create an original contribution to knowledge within your field.

3.4 Financial implication of returning to study

For some, the biggest worry in returning to study is financial. Many who return to study after working full-time for a number of years may have a mortgage, considerable bills and other financial commitments which render the self-funded route impossible. Some PhD courses, especially those with demonstratorship positions attached, offer a stipend. While this funding

may not match a full-time wage, it goes some way to maintaining a steady and predictable income.

Before starting your PhD, it is important to consider the financial implications of committing to further study. You should be certain that the stipend you will receive will cover your monthly living costs, bills, and any mortgage/rent payments. You should also consider how your new monthly income may affect these outgoings in the future. Where a pay-cut is taken, it is particularly important that these can be maintained over the coming years.

4. Conclusion

The PhD application process is often a long and exhausting one. Several months can be spent revising an application with your supervisory team to make it ready for submission. However, if due time and effort is put into devising a strong, distinct PhD proposal, then the benefits can be vast.

We encourage all potential PhD applicants, regardless of the route they intend to take, to spend sufficient time researching what doctoral study involves and how they can best prepare for it. This will not only prepare you for the application process, but will also provide you with the knowledge necessary to succeed in your PhD.

Correspondence

Samuel Hales MSc MBPsS

ESRC-funded PhD Student,

School of Psychology,

University of Kent.

Email: sth21@kent.ac.uk

Derek William Burns MSc MBPsS

Psychology Demonstrator and PhD student

Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics,
Sheffield Hallam University.

Email: d.burns@shu.ac.uk

Benjamin Partridge MRes

Psychology Demonstrator and PhD student

Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics,
Sheffield Hallam University.

Email: b.partridge@shu.ac.uk

References

Hughes, J. (2018, April 23rd). Six tips for pursuing your PhD with a family, *PhD Studies.com*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.phdstudies.com/article/six-tips-for-pursuing-your-phd-with-a-family/>

Jamil, B. (2014, September 17th) Shattering the myth: Raising kids is a stumbling block to

pursuing a PhD. *Elsevier*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.elsevier.com/connect/shattering-the-myth-rearing-children-is-a-stumbling-block-to-higher-studies>

Khazragui, H., & Hudson, J. (2014). Measuring the benefits of university research: Impact and the REF in the UK. *Research Evaluation*, 24(1), 51-62. doi: 10.1093/reseval/rvu028

Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868-879. doi: 10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008

Murdie, A. (2013, April 15th) An Open Letter to Someone Contemplating a PhD and Parenting. Retrieved from: <http://duckofminerva.com/2013/04/an-open-letter-to-someone-contemplating-a-phd-and-parenting.html>

WHICH? (2018). How much does childcare cost? Retrieved from: <https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/childcare/article/childcare-in-the-uk/how-much-does-childcare-cost>

Universities UK (2017). *Patterns and trends in UK higher education 2017*. Retrieved from <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/>