

TO PHD OR NOT TO PHD? THAT IS THE QUESTION

CONSIDER WHETHER TO TAKE YOUR RESEARCH FURTHER.

A PhD is a brilliant opportunity to carry out detailed research and specialise in an area you're passionate about. It allows you the freedom to organise and manage your own time while making a contribution to your field of study. You will have the chance to present your work at conferences, publish your findings and develop your skills and knowledge to a very high standard.

So far, so good. However embarking on a PhD is a huge commitment and is often a lonely affair, involving working over a period of three to five years. There is also the question of funding, which can be difficult to obtain.

Consider your ultimate career goal

Many students who undertake a PhD do so with the intention of becoming an academic; but the reality is that there are not enough jobs in academia for all who want them. So it's worth thinking about the other skills you'd gain from PhD study and how these could be in demand for other careers. For example, analytical, technical and research skills could be used working for a think tank, NGO or as a consultant.

Entry requirements

These will differ between institutions and departments. With the exception of some scientific subjects where you may be able to progress straight onto a PhD, or if you're an experienced graduate, you will generally need a masters or equivalent and a minimum of a 2:1 at undergraduate level to be considered for a PhD.

Where to study?

Depending on your area of research, some facilities or resources housed at different institutions may be more important than others. If you're planning to

look for work during your PhD, which isn't uncommon, it's also worth considering how close you are to potential employers.

Develop a broad range of skills

Evaluate the skills you'll pick up while doing a PhD, including the ones you might be missing, in order to pursue your chosen career path and think about how you could develop these. For example, to develop leadership and team-working skills, you could get involved with the organisation of a conference.


Finding the right supervisor

Your supervisor will have a massive impact on your PhD, progress and the skills you learn. Try to find out as much as possible about potential supervisors and their areas of specialism before applying for a PhD. University department websites normally have information on staff, their research and published works. Think about what's likely to be important to you in your relationship with your supervisor. This will allow you to prepare questions for when you meet them and others they've supervised.

The importance of self-motivation

It's inevitable you'll need to spend large amounts of time working on your own over the course of a PhD, particularly if you're doing an arts, humanities or social sciences PhD. This might appeal to you, and will develop your drive and motivation skills; but think about whether this is a style of working that suits you and what strategies you might be able to adopt to make it work if not.

Money, money, money

Studying for a PhD is expensive and finding funding is not always easy, so you'll need to be very proactive in searching for it. Work out realistically how much you need to live on, and then find out if the university or departments you're applying to have any funding from Research Councils, studentships or other large research charities, which may cover most, if not all, your costs. You could also apply to a sponsor and some support is available from a variety of charities and trusts, generally in the form of smaller awards. Depending on your area of study, there may be companies looking to fund research that can enhance their area of business. Finally, if you're already working and can put together a good case for how it would increase your performance, you might be able to apply for funding as a form of staff development. 

Find out more

- Ask past and present PhD students for their opinions and speak to potential supervisors or academic mentors.
- Speak to people in your department about your suitability for a PhD.
- Make an appointment with a careers consultant to discuss your thoughts.
- Take a look at these resources:
 - vitae.ac.uk
 - findaphd.com
 - targetjobs.co.uk/postgrad
 - prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/phd-study/postgraduate_qualifications_doctorates.htm
 - Explore the many blogs written by PhD students, and Twitter feeds eg [#phdchat](https://twitter.com/phdchat)