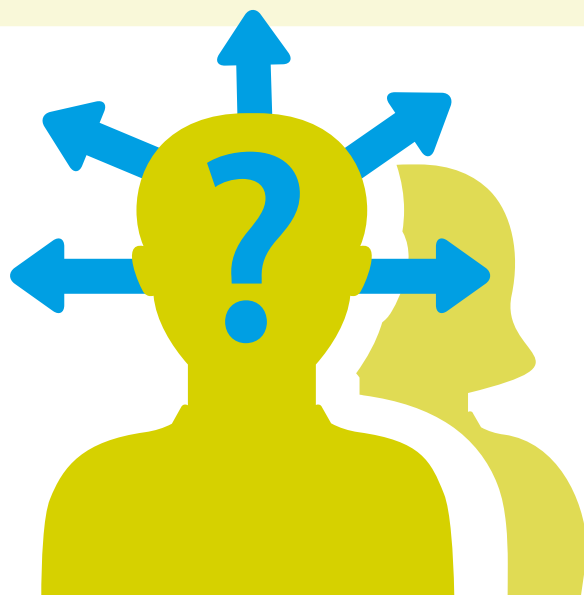


Should I do a PhD?

○ Actions and tips to help make an informed decision

Deciding to Undertake A PhD

Embarking on a PhD involves a commitment to at least three years of study and completion of a thesis, a substantial piece of supervised research which makes an original contribution to existing knowledge in the field. It may be necessary to find a potential supervisor in a university department in which you wish to study and then submit a research proposal or you may find a specific research project advertised as a studentship with funding attached. Some PhD programmes now include taught elements on research methods and other career related transferable skills. However, a PhD is awarded almost entirely on the quality of the thesis and your ability to present and discuss your findings in an oral examination (viva voce).



This ebook has been developed to help all those who are considering undertaking a PhD but its focus is on using career decision making approaches to assess and prepare for this rather than on the choice of research topic.

Making a decision to undertake a PhD, whether as a current undergraduate or taught postgraduate student or as a career change or development opportunity, involves:

- ➔ examining and researching yourself as well as the opportunities available
- ➔ using this information to make an informed decision and to prepare for the transition to a new experience



This approach is based on the DOTS model (Watts A. G., Law, B 1977).

In the following sections you will find a number of exercises and practical tasks based on each of the four parts of the model beginning with self-awareness.

Making a commitment to undertake a PhD is a career decision and the more time you take to explore what it involves and what you have to offer to it the more likely you are to be able to make an informed and realistic decision.

Making a PhD Decision

Self awareness

1. Why do you want to undertake a PhD?

2. List below the skills and attributes that you think you will need to have or develop if you undertake a PhD:

3. Go to the list of traits and capabilities of successful PhDs in the "The PhD Application Handbook" P. Bentley (Open University Press) Table 1:1 Page 6.

4. Read the PhD Candidate Case Studies on the jobs.ac.uk website but focus particularly on the points they make on being asked to describe the skills/behaviours and attributes that they have developed during their PhD. Then complete the tables below:

Which skills/attributes/traits and capabilities have you already acquired?

Evidence you could use in a PhD application or interview

Which skills/attributes/traits and capabilities will you need to develop during a PhD?

Resources:

The Postgraduate's Companion – Section One Considering Becoming a PG Research Student In the UK and Securing an Offer
Getting Your PhD (Churchill and Sanders) – Motivations for Doing a PhD

Opportunity awareness

This aspect of making a decision to undertake a PhD often predominates with particular importance being given to the need for prospective students to contact potential supervisors as well as searching for advertised opportunities.

To help you to prepare to approach a supervisor and to check that an advertised PhD is right for you make some notes on the following questions:

What area of research interests you and why?

Who is currently actively working on research you are interested in? Where do they work?



Action: Read the PhD case studies on [jobs.ac.uk](#) and focus on the reasons these researchers gave on when and why they decided to do a PhD?

Be aware that “PhD” is often used as a general term but there are different types of research degrees available including professional and specialist doctorates such as an EngD (Doctorate in Engineering). Make sure you research these different routes and what they involve, for example EngD research projects usually involve collaboration with industry and so those researchers who are motivated by working in applied research areas may be more suited to this than a more theoretical research topic.



Other resources:

[Prospects.ac.uk](#) – [Postgraduate Study in the UK](#)

[jobs.ac.uk](#) – [A Guide to 5 Types of Research Degree](#)

Making an informed decision

You may now have a lot of information about yourself, why you want to undertake a PhD and also about PhD opportunities which will be useful to you in this decision making stage. However you might also like to consider how you have reached important decisions in the past? Have you, for example, taken decisions using a rational and logical approach or do you act in a more impulsive or emotional way? There are different decision making styles and it can be useful to reflect on your style and be aware of the implications for your PhD decision making.

Action:

Discover Your Career Decision Making Style
www.kent.edu/career/discover-your-decision-making-style

You may also face pressure from other sources as you consider undertaking a PhD?

Action: Pressures and Expectations

Did someone else, a tutor or a family member, suggest that you should do a PhD?

Do other members of your family have a PhD?

Do your friends/colleagues/peers have or are undertaking PhDs?

If you have answered yes to any or all of these questions, consider carefully, whether you are making a decision to do a PhD in response to these outside pressures or influences?

When you are making this decision it is also important to recognise that there is still an element of risk involved and that you cannot be 100% sure that a PhD is right for you. The final section of the e-book therefore asks you to consider some of the transitions you may need to make as you start a PhD and therefore be prepared for them.

Preparing for your PhD

Preparing for a new experience

Preparing for the working day

1. Your current working or student day - what is a typical working day like?
2. Ask a current PhD student what their working day is like?
3. Note the differences and the implications they may have for you, for example if you work better when your working day is structured will you need to bring some of this into the early stages of your PhD?

Preparing for the work environment and culture

1. If you are a current student try to get some relevant PhD experience, for example a summer lab project
2. If you are leaving employment to return to university or are undertaking a PhD for professional development consider:
 - a. Why you are making a career change? What is your new career goal and is it realistic?
 - b. If you are senior professional in your current role how will you deal with your new PhD situation?
3. Find current PhD students and ask them to describe their working environment and culture and how it differed from their previous student or employment environments. You can also read the PhD Case Studies on jobs.ac.uk and note the points that these students make about the differences they encountered. How will you react and deal with a different working environment or culture?

Finally make sure that you attend induction talks and find out about the support, training and other opportunities there may be to help you to settle in quickly and start working towards achieving your PhD.

About the author



Clare Jones is a Senior Careers Adviser at Nottingham University with specific responsibility for Early Career Researchers.

Clare has been working with research staff and students since 2005 offering individual careers guidance, advice and information and delivering career management training courses across the university. Clare would describe her own career as being a “classic skills portfolio career” and she is strongly committed to enabling researchers to recognise and value all their skills and experiences.

Further reading



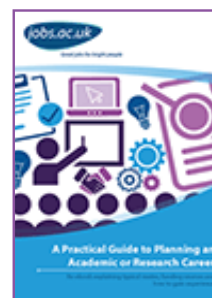
10 Career Paths for PhDs

An ebook to help you explore options outside academia and identify your transferable skills.



Career Planning for PhDs ebook

Activities & Advice to Help you Explore your Options & Succeed a Competitive Job Market



A Practical Guide to Planning an Academic or Research Career

An ebook explaining typical routes, funding sources and how to gain experience



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