Finding and Funding your PhD
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Knowing if a PhD is right for you

The first step towards establishing a successful PhD project, is determining what you want to do. Be sure you have explored all of your options, and be certain that you are in the right field for you. It is also important to determine if you should do a masters program before your PhD. It is often possible to terminate your PhD part-way through and obtain a masters instead, and while this is a superb back-up plan, it is not advisable to enter a program planning for failure. Factors to consider include funding options, allotted time, and course requirements. Masters programs are less expensive, however there is also less funding available. (GradSchools.com, 2009a) They take much less time to complete, which is appropriate if you are unsure if the field is right for you. It is also easier to get into a masters program; many PhDs require additional training, or, if you are applying in the United States, entrance exams such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) (GradSchools.com, 2009a). These tests are similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs), with sections on verbal reasoning, critical thinking and basic skills, as well as subject specific exams (ETS, 2009). There are also different ways to obtain a PhD. While a PhD typically involves independent research, there are many programs available that offer various levels of instruction. Some departments will hold seminars for skills such as thesis writing and methodologies, while others, such as the “New Route PhD” are 4 year programs with formal training (FindAPhD.com, 2008; The University of Sheffield, 2009). In the USA, the first two years of a PhD are structured with taught courses, followed by a year of research, then the dissertation and defense (Commission for Educational Exchange, 2009; Fullbright Commission, 2008; Gibler, 2006).

Choosing a PhD

Once you have established that a PhD is right for you, there are several choices to consider. Firstly, determine if there is a project you had in mind, or if you are more interested in a general area. If you know specifically what you are interested in, you will need to find someone who will support you, and take you on as a student. This involves contacting experts in your subject area, and explaining to them what you had in mind and how you planned on accomplishing it, as well as why you think they should take you on. There are additional steps to take, which will be discussed later. If you do not have a specific topic in mind, consider using sources such as findaphd.com to search for existing proposals to which you can apply. See appendices for a list of such resources. Each site allows you to search through listed projects and programs using your own search criteria. These allow you to look through available programs and projects to find one that interests you. The postings are frequently updated, so you can find a project at any time. You should also ask your supervisor or advisor, as they are often sent information on PhDs, which they may be able to pass on.
An important factor to consider while you are searching for possible projects, is WHERE you want to apply. As well as location itself, consider what supervisors are available, levels of departmental support, what resources are available, and the ratings of the University (FindAPhD.com, 2008).

The Research Assessment exercise (RAE) is an assessment used for universities in the UK. You can find recent RAE publications at http://www.rae.ac.uk/. Attending a program in a department or University with high ratings (5 or 5*) will boost your credentials (FindAPhD.com, 2008). However, it is important not to take a rating at face value. It is not uncommon for Universities to mask poor programs by grouping them with more successful subjects. You should also look at some of the RAE criteria, such as income from grants, numbers of research students, research publications (if there are any, are the well respected?), and industrial support (a well funded department is more likely to have funds available for PhD students)(FindAPhD.com, 2008; RAE, 2008). Although RAE does not exist in the USA, you can still examine the same criteria. Additionally, there are other agencies which conduct research appraisals in the USA, (such as the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institute of Health (NIH), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), with COSEPUP (the National Academies Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy) (Tunzelmann et al, 2003). The National Research Council (NRC) is expecting to release a report in mid February (2009) with ratings and rankings of PhD programs of many American Universities (National Academy of Sciences, 2009b). This information will be available on their website; http://sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/Resdoc/index.htm. Additional USA rankings can also be found on http://www.phds.org/

Applying

Once you have found a project, you need to apply for it. This involves filling out the applications forms, and sending in a CV, as you would for any program. If you find what you are looking for on a website, there will be contact information there for you. Make sure your request is personalized, and makes you stand out. In your CV, as well as your employment history and general qualifications, you should list you final year modules, any research you have done, and any publications you may have (FindAPhD.com, 2008). Explain why you are interested in the project, and what makes you the best researcher to undertake it. There is usually an interview process as well. If you have your own idea, you should have at least a basic proposal. This will be useful when you apply for funding, and it also shows that you are serious about your idea. The better you present your project, and yourself, the more likely you are to obtain academic support. If you already have academic backing for your idea, they may help you with your proposal write-up.

Funding

The source of funding depends on both your topic of choice, and where you chose to do it. Funding can come from the University itself, studentships, independent grants, scholarships, bursaries, or other organizations (FindAPhD.com 2007). It is easier to find a supervisor if you already have funding, although this may mean you will need to fund yourself, at least partially (FindAPhD.com, 2007). This can be very expensive, but thankfully there are numerous options for financial assistance. You can always apply for funding once you have started your project (FindAPhD.com, 2007). In the UK, research is often funded by research councils. There are seven major research councils; each has an allotment of funds which are awarded on individual
merit. See Appendices for a full list of research councils and their links. Some have more money available than others, so the likelihood of receiving funding does depend on which council you are applying to. The Medical Research Council (MRC) has a significantly larger sum to draw from than the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (MRC, 2009; AHRC 2009), Therefore the AHRC is likely to have much higher competition for a smaller pool of funds. If your project has limited applicability or relevance to the council, you are unlikely to receive funding. In addition, only UK residents or citizens qualify for Research council-funded studentships. For European Union nationals, fees may be funded, but not research costs. Other international students do not qualify to receive any funding from councils (FindAPhD.com 2007).

Research charities do not discriminate between nationalities (Hero, 2009). The large charities usually award funds to the University rather than individually (Hero, 2009, AMRC, 2008), however there are still charities to which you can apply. There are more charities relating to health research than any other discipline (RD Info, 2008). See appendices for a list of research charities. Additionally, many businesses will sponsor research projects, particularly pharmaceuticals and the energy sector (GradSchools.com, 2009). Be aware that some of your costs may not be covered. It is possible to have your Fees funded, but not your research, or vice versa. It is a good idea to have an estimate of your costs when you are searching for funding, and know what expenses you can and cannot afford to cover. When you apply for funding, it is important to make sure your project is relevant to the funding body. You need to convince them that the results of your work will significantly benefit them, or their cause. For example, do not apply to the AMRC unless you can make your project medically relevant. Search for ways you can make your projects as applicable as possible; find out who you could target for funding, and gear each proposal so it sounds appealing to that specific funding body.

Universities also have funding available for students, although this is limited depending on the department to which you are applying. Some departments will receive more funds than others, which you can determine from the RAE and numbers of funded post graduate students. This money is usually allotted to projects proposed by staff, so if you are proposing your own project for University funding, it is essential to have the full support of an academic, and even then the funds may not be available (FindAPhD.com 2007). If you are in the USA, there are numerous scholarships and fellowships to which you can apply (GradSchools.com, 2009c; GradSchools. com, 2009d). These award you a certain amount of money to help you during your studies. See appendices for a list of scholarship search engines. Fellowships are fully funded, usually by the University, and are limited in number, and therefore highly competitive. Portable (external) Graduate Fellowships are independently awarded, while Institutional fellowships are distributed by the University (GradSchools. com 2009d). There are also teaching and assisted research positions, where you essentially work for the university in exchange for a break in your tuition (GradSchools.com 2009d).

Whether you intend to pursue a PhD in the USA or Europe, do your own idea or some one else’s, there is always funding available. You can apply for funding at any time during your studies, so if you were self funded and then realized you could not afford to finish your research, there are other options for you (FindAPhD.com, 2008). You can also apply for PhD projects at any time. Although most start in October, they are posted year-round (FindAPhD.com, 2008). Just because you don’t find what you are looking for right away does not mean you should give up. Be persistent, know what you want, and you will find it.
Appendices

Finding a PhD

http://www.gradschools.com/
Searches worldwide PhD programs by field. Also contains information on funding.

http://www.findaphd.com/
Focuses on European programs, although it also contains search parameters for international students; both those wishing to study abroad from Europe, and internationals wishing to study in Europe.

http://www.phds.org/
Searches American Universities. This site also provides rankings of programs based on criteria you chose.

http://www.jobs.ac.uk/
Search for PhDs available in the UK

http://www.phdinfofind.org/
has a list of web pages which may be helpful for the application process and obtaining funding in the USA

Rankings

http://www.phds.org/ Shows program ratings based on criteria you enter into the system

http://sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/Resdoc/index.htm USA rankings, to be published in February

http://www.rae.ac.uk/ UK RAE ratings for 2008

Research councils

www.ahrc.ac.uk Art and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)

www.bbsrc.ac.uk Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)

www.mrc.ac.uk Medical Research Council (MRC)

Has a specific section for technology, which deals with the application of research findings

www.mrctechnology.org

www.epsrc.ac.uk Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC)

www.esrc.ac.uk Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

www.nerc.ac.uk Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)

www.stfc.ac.uk/Home.aspx The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC)

Includes the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC)

And the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC)
Research charities

http://rdfunding.org.uk/ For health related funding -allows you to search for charities that might fund you. You can search by topic or research council, locally as well as internationally.

http://www.amrc.org.uk/ Association of Medical research Charities (AMRC) provides funding for medical research

http://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/about/ Leverhulm trust, not specific to any academic area. Awards maximum fellowships of 45,000 to assist with costs.

http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/ Wellcome Trust funds research into human and animal health. It is the world’s largest medical research charity, and funds internationally as well as locally.

More Funding Options for the USA

http://www.gradschools.com/ Allows you to search for PhD funding for American programs

www.fafsa.com Scholarships for USA citizens or residents (requires a social security number)

www.fastweb.com Scholarships (often require essays)

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