

Applying for an Arts and Humanities PhD at a UK university

Welcome to this starter information document. It aims to clarify many of the processes and considerations for students interested in applying for a PhD in the Arts and Humanities at a UK university. There are a lot of areas to pay attention to so you may choose to read it a section at a time. Hopefully, it will help allow people without academic mentors or access to support to consider applying for PhDs and to achieve funding.

The document covers:

- What PhD project you are hoping to undertake
- Project concepts
- Identifying institutions or supervisors
- Making contact
- Working on proposal

Starting point: What kind of project are you hoping to undertake?

There are two main types of PhD funding. The most common type is an “open call” where a project on any relevant topic may be eligible for funding. Following this route, most of the work down to the prospective applicant.

The other type is a funded project, including collaborative doctoral awards, where a research project or research partnership has PhD funding attached to it.

Funded PhD projects and collaborative doctoral awards

Pre-funded PhD places normally have preset topics or aims and there are project objectives or conditions that your work will need to meet. For example, you may carry out research for an industry partner or explore a subtheme in a bigger funded research project.

If this is your preferred route, most funded PhD-ships are advertised on www.jobs.ac.uk. They should give an indication of the skillset and qualifications required. Take time to look at projects currently advertised to get a feel for what is commonly asked of candidates. You may also wish to develop contacts with key researchers who may have funded projects in their specialism. Pre-funded PhD projects come up sporadically so be aware that this is not a guaranteed route to funding or to a project suited to your personal CV.

Project concept: what do you hope to research?

PhD candidates who approach departments or individuals without a rough idea of what they would like to do are often hard to support. This is because PhD applications are often personal and require specific information. Most supervisors cannot agree to work on a project that they don't fully understand. You are not committed to a tentative project idea, but it gives a helpful indication of where you are in your thinking. For example, a PhD on musical theatre is too broad, but a study of a particular topic or show would be a useful starting point.

Identifying your research topic

Sometimes, there will be an obvious topic following on from your previous research or from your experience more generally. If not, consider what department or area you'd like to study in. Is there a period, topic, theme, individual, community, or issue you are drawn to? Is this area well-researched? If not, what do you think you could contribute? If not, is there something adjacent to it that might be a good fit.

It's OK not to be certain of your project, but a PhD is a big commitment so don't get too far into the process until you have a basic idea of what you would like to do.

Finding institutions and supervisors: who do you want to work with and where do you want to study?

Finding an institution and a supervisory team is a personal and complicated process. For some people (e.g. people with caring responsibilities, who intend to work part-time, etc.), the location of the university will matter a lot. If this is the case, investigate what department and researchers are around in the location that is useful to you.

For some people, joining an active research community is essential to their PhD plans. In this case, you need to investigate research groups, clusters, and funded projects to see where a thriving community might be available. For others, finding the "right" supervisor is the most important part of choosing where to pursue a PhD application. The right supervisor can be very important to a PhD project, but this depends on the research topic and the individual planning to carry out research. In this instance, looking at staff profiles on department webpages, looking at conference programmes, publications, and sometimes, social media can help to identify potential academics.

Questions to consider when looking for institutions and individuals

- Does the type of university matter to you?
- Does location matter to you?
- Does the makeup of the staff and student body matter to you?
- Should it have community engagement?
- Do you need access to specific resources like equipment, archives, or specialist software?
- Are you looking for a community or “just” for a subject expert?
- Are you planning to live in or near to the university?
- Do you need support in any specific areas?
 - Subject knowledge?
 - Research or writing skills?
 - Mentorship?
- Would you like specific postgraduate training or experience, like teaching opportunities?

Contacting people: are supervisors available and is your research welcome?

Try to contact possible supervisors early in the process. You can also “cold contact” departments with your basic project concept and see who responds. It’s important to do this as soon as is convenient because staff are not always able to take on students or you may discover that a person you thought was the right “fit” isn’t compatible with the way you want to work.

Potential supervisors have almost no obligations to an applicant before they engage with the process. However, it is common to expect an exchange of emails. Many will also invite you to meet with them (online or in-person).

It is also fairly common for prospective supervisors to offer feedback on proposal drafts and to help with funding applications, especially competitive schemes run by the Arts and Humanities research council. If you are offered support, always check about the person’s availability. For example, most universities close for at least a week in December, which is very close to funding deadlines.

Suggestions for approaching a potential department or supervisor

There are no hard and fast rules. However, the following suggestions may help you identify genuine interest and identify the people best suited to you.

- Always give a brief introduction to yourself
- Include a short summary of your qualifications or experience
- Include a short project summary
- Indicate if you are seeking funding

If you can, you should also include a project proposal. However, you may be too early in the process and that is fine. Be polite and respectful. Sometimes, you may not get a response, but generally, people will respond even if they are not available to support you.

Writing a PhD proposal

It is important to know that your PhD application to the university to get a place and the application for funding are usually separate processes. Most funding applications have strict word counts for project proposals and have key areas you need to explain. Try and look at these forms before finishing your university application as this will save you time and work in the long run.

Standard sections in a PhD proposal

These are the most common areas that a PhD proposal is likely to include:

- Project title – try to make this accessible to an uninformed reader
- Project summary
- Background to project or project overview
- Project aims and/or research questions
- Methods and/or methodology
- Ethical considerations
- Timeline for completing the research, including research trips and writing time
- Bibliography or reference list

You can access a template PhD proposal (written by me) here:

<https://hannahmarierobbins.com/blog/resources/>