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Applying for a PhD in Psychology at the University of Sussex for 2016 Entry

What does doing a PhD in Psychology involve?

A PhD is a qualification to do research. By opting to do a PhD you are, to some extent, committing yourself to a career in research (although not necessarily in a University setting). By the end of your PhD you will be a world-expert on your particular topic of study. But, more importantly, you will have acquired the skills to tackle new research questions independently and you are by no means constrained to keep on studying exactly the same topic that you specialised in for your PhD research. To successfully complete a PhD you will need to write a thesis: a “substantial original contribution to knowledge or understanding... based on what may be reasonably expected of a capable and diligent student after three years of full-time study”. Although the thesis is necessary, there is more to doing a PhD than collecting data and writing a thesis. You will be expected to publish your data in academic journals and will have the opportunity to mix with the leading researchers at conferences. You will develop as a person by navigating through difficult problems, finding creative solutions, and developing a self-driven approach to work through the guidance and support of your supervisory team and the academic community.

Why should I choose Sussex for my PhD in Psychology?

Research lies at the heart of the School of Psychology. Our cutting-edge research aims to enhance understanding and provide innovative approaches to key psychological challenges and issues. We are engaged in research across the broad range of the discipline. Sussex was ranked in the top 10 for research in the ‘Psychology, Neuroscience and Psychiatry’ panel in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. 86% of our research was recognised as world leading or internationally excellent.

Of course you don’t have to believe to us: ask the students. You can find out more about the student experience of doing a PhD in Psychology at Sussex from this link:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/showcase/researchdegree>

What qualifications do I need to do a PhD?

Minimally we require that students from the UK have a 2.1 or above or the equivalent grades at Masters level normally in psychology or (occasionally) a closely related discipline. In reality, competition is very tight and many of our intake have first class degrees at BSc level or a ‘distinction’ at MSc level. It is becoming increasingly common to have an MSc before undertaking a PhD. If you don’t have an MSc then you can still be accepted on to our PhD program but you should expect to attend postgraduate level classes in your first year of PhD in addition to conducting research for your PhD. We will, however, look at your overall profile of grades and not just the overall classification. For instance, we would look favourably on candidates who got excellent grades in their project or research methods class, or students who showed a big improvement over their degree.

For students with degrees from overseas, our admissions office will determine how your qualifications map on to the UK system. Our English language requirements are IELTS 7.0 (not less than 6.5 in each section) or Internet TOEFL with 95 overall (at least 22 in Listening, 23 in Reading, 23 in Speaking and 24 in Writing). For converting degree grades, you may find these guidelines helpful:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-degree-equivalency-table-and-methodology>

What are the stages involved in preparing my application?

If you are applying for an advertised studentship to work with a particular person on a pre-specified topic then steps 4-5 may be briefer or omitted altogether. In general, the research proposal is one way for us to assess your understanding of the literature so it is still useful even if it is on a pre-specified topic. Read the advert carefully and contact the named person if you are uncertain about this.

- 1) Decide what kinds of topics of research interest you. Students typically base this around their previous experience during lectures or running their own project.
- 2) Find a potential supervisor (see below) or find an advertised studentship (e.g. from www.jobs.ac.uk or www.findaphd.co.uk). Check the application deadline!
- 3) Do some preliminary reading (e.g. recent papers published in that field, including some by your potential supervisor).
- 4) Contact your potential supervisor, normally via email. At this stage, you do not need a definite plan. You need to indicate why you find the topic interesting and send your CV (which should list all courses taken to date and grades obtained). You may also want to ask questions to them (e.g. what new lines of research are you hoping to pursue? Are you hoping to take on new PhD students?).
- 5) If the potential supervisor expresses an initial interest then this would be a good time to arrange a phone call or Skype call (although email exchanges could remain an option). This isn't part of the formal process but is a good way of ironing out any confusion and making sure this feels right before committing lots of time to the application.
- 6) Write a draft of a 'research proposal' (tips on doing this are below). You may also want to get feedback on the proposal from your potential supervisor before submitting it.
- 7) Submit the online application (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/pg/applying/>) by selecting 'PhD in Psychology' and including the necessary attachments.

How do I find a potential supervisor?

Most academic members of faculty in the School of Psychology are eligible to act as supervisors of research students. You can find a list of people, organised according to our four research groups, here:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/research>

You should ask potential supervisors whether they are likely to be taking on any PhD students in the coming year as an initial step. It is possible to be jointly supervised by two people, including supervisors outside of Psychology.

What do I need to write in my research proposal?

The research proposal should not exceed 2 pages including references, be set at minimum 10 font type with margins a minimum of 1cm.

The first section should cover the background to the studies. What do we know already? Why is this topic interesting and important? You should assume that you are writing it for someone who has a good general knowledge of psychology but who is not an expert in that particular area of research.

The second section should cover gaps in our current knowledge. What don't we know? Could the existing findings be explained differently? At the end of this section it would be important to outline your aims and hypotheses.

The third and final section should propose a methodology to address these issues. The level of detail needed here is likely to vary but we are interested in your ability to think critically. What kinds of control conditions are needed? What exactly would we need to measure? What kind of pilot studies may be needed to be run first? What problems may occur and how could they be dealt with? This section need not cover a full methodology for all 3 years of study. However, you are expected to specify how your initial idea could be developed or expanded upon over this longer time frame.

Please add a reference list, preferably in APA format. Around 6 well chosen references would be acceptable but there is not strict upper or lower limit.

Should my proposed supervisor comment on the research proposal?

If you are applying for an advertised studentship to work on a particular topic with a particular person then there is no need for them to comment on a draft of this.

If you are applying for an open call (in which you are developing your own ideas) then there will be more need for dialogue between you and your potential supervisor. It is important that you discuss the direction of your research proposal with your potential supervisor before you start writing it. After completing a draft, it would be good for your supervisor to comment on it and provide feedback but he/she will not rewrite it for you. As the proposal is one way of assessing you, it is important that it primarily reflects your work and your ideas. It is also important that you give your supervisor enough time to read it (e.g. up to a week) and you give yourself enough time to make changes afterwards.

Does the content of my research proposal commit me in any way should I obtain a place?

Your research proposal should not be construed as a 'contract' to undertake the specified research should you get offered a place. The research proposal fulfils several roles. It is one way of assessing your ability to identify important scientific questions and think about potential research solutions. It also enables us to assess the extent to which we may be able to support you in terms of providing the necessary supervision and resources. The structure of your PhD is likely to evolve over time and need not closely reflect the proposal you made at the time of application.

What sources of funding are available? What are the deadlines?

In general, students don't apply for funding directly. Instead the University has sources of funding available to it, and the funds are assigned to students on the strength of the application and nature of the research. The main exception to this is for students outside of the EU. Most of these *Overseas students* receive studentships from their Home country to study here, and apply directly to the appropriate agencies in their Home country. Overseas students are also eligible for the Chancellor's International PhD Studentships.

Within the School of Psychology, common sources of funding are:

- *ESRC studentships (Economic and Social Research Council)*. These are UK government funded and available only to UK citizens. The ESRC covers most areas of psychology (including some neuroscience areas, but not biomedical research). Applications must be received before Friday 22nd January 2016. All students applying to the January deadline whose research fits within the ESRC remit should specify 'ESRC' as the proposed source of funding on their online application form.
- *School of Psychology Studentships*. These studentships are entirely funded by the University. They are available to any area of psychology and are available to students from any country (but the studentship will only pay for fees at the UK/Home rate). The deadline is Friday 22nd January 2016. If you are applying in the January round and aren't eligible for the ESRC studentships then you should state 'School of Psychology Studentship' as your proposed source of funding.
- *Sussex Neuroscience PhD Scholarships*. These offer 4 years of funding in which the first year consists of a series of lab rotations. The deadline for applications is 11th January 2016. Applicants whose research falls within the remit of both the Psychology PhD and the Sussex Neuroscience PhD should apply to both schemes to maximise their chances.
- *Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science*. Up to two studentships per year are funded through this centre with co-funding from the School of Psychology. The deadline is Friday 22nd January 2016.
- *MRC (Medical Research Council) and EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) Studentships*. These are UK government funded and, hence, available only to UK citizens. These tend to be advertised in the Spring/Summer and tied to particular projects and supervisors, rather than being an open call.
- *BBSRC (Biological and Biotechnology Research Council) CASE awards*. These are UK government funded and, hence, available only to UK citizens. They entail an element of collaboration with an external partner (e.g. in industry). . These tend to be advertised in the Spring/Summer and tied to particular projects and supervisors, rather than being an open call.
- *Chancellor's International Studentships*. These are specifically for students charged at the overseas rate. The details will be announced in Winter 2015. Applicants develop their own proposal rather than responding to an advertised one.
- *Charities, Philanthropic, and Industry funded studentships*. These can be advertised throughout the year and are tied to particular projects and supervisors (and sometimes particular students), rather than being an open call.

It is possible to *self-fund* and we consider self-funded applications throughout the year. However, self-funding is a significant commitment and not one to be taken lightly. Most students go through a 'bad patch' in which things don't work and/or motivation levels dip.

For self-funded students, who are often part time and juggling other commitments, this produces a stronger pressure to quit than it does for others (and indeed our completion rate for self-funded students is lower). As such, we would expect self-funded students to demonstrate, on application, a very strong level of commitment (personally and professionally) to their chosen topic of study in addition to demonstrating an appropriate level of academic ability. We also ask potential self-funded students to submit a 'financial plan' with their application – this can be a brief (one paragraph) statement about how you will fund your studies and should also consider any contingency plans (e.g. redundancy, or if employed casually).

Please follow the link below to read more about fees, finance:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/money/>

What does my funding cover?

Although funding rates do vary according to the source of funding, the sources above would normally cover fees, living costs, and most research expenses (including some funds for conference travel).

Students from within the EU may only be eligible for 'fees only' (i.e. no living costs paid) if they do not meet residency requirements (resident for 3 year+ in the UK) and are applying for Research Council (e.g. ESRC) studentships. Please ask in advance if you are uncertain.

If I obtain a place will I be required to teach?

None of our PhD students are required to teach as part of their studentship. There are, however, opportunities for PhD students to engage in teaching for which you will be paid and receive training. These opportunities are advertised and you will sign a separate contract to employ you as an Associate Tutor (AT). The teaching typically involves demonstrating during research methods and statistics classes together with associated activities (answering student queries, marking). This experience looks good on your CV and is both a personal reward and challenge. You would be working alongside a member of academic faculty who would have overall responsibility for delivering the module and you will most likely work as a team with other PhD students to deliver the teaching.

What is the difference between 1+3, +3, and +4?

A 1+3 implies that the studentship lasts for 4 years but the first year is an MSc and the remaining years are for the (full time) PhD. This would be suitable for students who do not have an MSc already. We typically fund only a small number of these each year and normally only as part of the ESRC studentships. MSc degrees linked to 1+3s include the MRes in Psychological Research Methods, MSc in Applied Social Psychology, MSc in Cognitive Neuroscience, and MSc in Foundations in Clinical Psychology and Mental Health.

A +3 implies that the studentship is for 3 (full-time) years. Most of our studentships tend to be +3.

A +4 implies that the studentship is for 4 (full-time) years. These are offered as part of the *Sussex Neuroscience* PhD scheme and occasionally for other students.

What does part-time study entail?

Part time study involves completing the research within 5 years (with a minimum submission date of 4 years and a maximum of 6 years). Most part time students are self-funded. Our School Policy is that self-funded part time students should normally initially register for an MPhil with a view to upgrading to a PhD after a minimum of 2 years of study. The ESRC also supports part-time mode of entry. Other studentships tend to be offered only on a full-time basis but a request to transfer to part-time can be granted if circumstances change (e.g. after maternity leave).

Will I be interviewed?

We screen all applications first: some candidates are rejected straight away and others are placed 'on hold'. All short-listed candidates will be invited to an interview and, if necessary, we can interview via Skype or phone. Unfortunately, we are not able to cover costs of travel for candidates invited for interview.

Should I apply to several institutions at the same time?

Given that competition is so tight, it is expected that students will make multiple applications to different institutions. This does not reflect badly on you. However, if it emerges that you are making multiple applications to study completely different topics then it would look like you didn't have a clear vision of what interests you.

What else should I be reading to prepare myself?

We strongly recommend Phillips and Pugh "How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors". This will not only guide you through the application process, but will be a useful resource throughout your PhD studies.

Good luck with your application!