



Applying for a PhD

Guidance for
Applicants

Fair Admissions in
Postgraduate Research



**CLOSE
THE GAP**
Fair Admissions in Postgraduate Research

Introduction

Pursuing a PhD is a significant and transformative milestone in a research career. However, applying for a PhD can often feel like navigating a maze. The process requires not only an understanding of formal application requirements but also an awareness of some unwritten rules. While the journey can be challenging, the right preparation can help you navigate it successfully.

In this guide:

- **Before you apply:** Reflect on your reasons for pursuing a PhD, how it aligns with your career goals, and recommendations for choosing a programme.
- **Preparing your application:** Find guidance on approaching and communicating with potential supervisors, crafting a personal statement, and writing a research proposal.
- **What to expect after you apply:** Gain an overview of the doctoral admissions process, strategies for preparing for PhD interviews, and an understanding of application outcomes.

This guide offers general advice. Individual disciplines and departments may have specific criteria, processes and expectations. Please refer to the requirements and deadlines on your chosen programme's website and [in the course directory](#), to ensure you have all the necessary information.

Before you apply

Thinking of Applying for a PhD?

Are you passionate about research and ready to take the next step in your academic journey? Applying for a high-level programme requires some advanced strategic planning and a thorough understanding of the specific requirements of your desired programme.

This guidance outlines key factors to consider before applying for a PhD course and a brief overview of the application process.

What are my motivations for pursuing a PhD?

There can be many drivers for pursuing a PhD. Some are extrinsic, such as the rewards associated with the prestige of a PhD degree or the institution. However, working towards a PhD is a long-term commitment and a demanding endeavour. In many cases, as a PhD student, you are an independent researcher and much of the work is your responsibility. To stay motivated, it is crucial to have an internal drive and a passion for research. Ask yourself, do you truly enjoy doing research work? If you are unsure, consider talking to current PhD students or trying to take up a research role to gain a sense of the nature of the work.



Close the Gap

Before you apply

What are my career goals?

Determining the type of degree needed for your desired career is the initial step in narrowing down your options for postgraduate research programmes. Reflect on the nature of the work you aspire to do and the type of degree that will best help you achieve your goals. Is a PhD a necessary step for the career change or progression that you envisage for yourself? If your career aspirations lie in academia or research more broadly (since not all PhD researchers work in academia), pursuing a doctoral degree may be the right path for you.

Having a clear understanding of what doctoral education entails is crucial not only for deciding your path, but also for signalling your readiness for doctoral study and awareness of its demands. Academic assessors will consider this when making admissions decisions.

How can I fund a PhD?

Funding considerations are particularly crucial for PhD programmes due to the substantial costs involved. The costs associated with PhDs are tuition fees and living costs for each year of study. If you are self-funding your studies, you will need to cover both of these costs yourself.

However, there are numerous funding sources available, both internal and external to the University, which offer varying levels of support. Some scholarships and grants cover full tuition fees and living expenses, whilst others may contribute to a portion of these costs.

These funding opportunities have strict deadlines and, in some cases, you may need to apply for them separately. You should look carefully at the [postgraduate study website](#) and your department's webpages to understand the different funding sources and their respective deadlines.

Apply for several scholarships or grants to increase your chances of securing financial support. To get you started in that search, check the [Postgraduate Funding Search](#).

Before you apply

Do I need to have research experience?

Typically, PhD offers are made to applicants who already have some level of research experience. This experience is often acquired during the final year of undergraduate studies, through Master's level programmes, or additional research opportunities. In some fields applicants may also have relevant technical skills, such as advanced statistical methods, technical software proficiency or other specialised competencies.

If you don't have extensive research experience, you can still highlight your professional background by showcasing how you have worked with data, used various research methods, or applied research approaches in your professional roles. Additionally, consider acquiring specific skills that may be essential for your desired programme. Spend time exploring various opportunities and devise a plan to strengthen your profile, knowledge, and skills for future applications.

If you are passionate about a particular topic but think that you don't have enough experience or lack some specific skills, there are many ways of developing your academic skills or increasing your research experience. You could work as a research assistant in a field that interests you, or participate in a research experience placement.

The University of Cambridge offers [a number of research internships](#) for undergraduates from underrepresented groups who are interested in pursuing postgraduate studies.

What is the right programme for me?

When selecting a PhD **programme**, it is crucial to familiarise yourself with the department's research centres and areas of expertise. In order to support your research, it is important that the department has supervisors with knowledge of your field. Unlike programmes in other countries which may include structured classes or research rotations during the first year, UK PhD programmes generally expect you to begin your research shortly after starting. Therefore, finding a research environment that aligns with your research goals is particularly important.

Take the time to immerse yourself in the department's website to determine if it is the right environment for you. Some departments offer online or in-person opportunities such as open days where you can gain insights into the research environment and available opportunities.

Check carefully if you need to contact a supervisor prior to submitting your formal application, as this can have an impact on your application.

Note that a supervisor's willingness to supervise your project does not guarantee admission to the PhD programme. You will still need to receive an offer for study from the University.

In relation to potential **supervisors**, supervision structures vary across disciplines and departments. For instance, in STEM subjects, applicants might apply to work within specific projects or labs, and you will likely apply to work with (and for) a particular academic or Principal Investigator (PI) who will serve as your supervisor. In the social sciences, arts, and humanities applicants generally apply to the programme, and may select a supervisor either before submitting their application or upon acceptance.

When looking for potential supervisors:

- identify supervisors who are actively engaged in teaching and research within your field of interest;
- seek supervisors whose expertise aligns with your research interests (although it doesn't have to be a perfect match);
- review their recent publications and ongoing research projects on departmental websites and social media platforms for insight.

Preparing your Application

When preparing to apply, you are strongly advised to thoroughly explore the course directory, postgraduate admissions website and departmental pages. While it may seem like a lot of preparation, this is where you will find important information to help with your application. Understanding the entry requirements, deadlines, and application processes for both funding and admissions is crucial.

Begin your preparations months in advance, as crafting a compelling application takes time. Start developing your research proposal early and consider asking an academic in your current institution (if available) to review it. Allocate sufficient time to carefully write and review all components of your application, avoiding last-minute submissions. If possible, seek feedback from individuals who have previously applied for PhD study.

While there is significant variability, most PhD programmes typically require the following:

- 01 Application Form**
Pay close attention to each section and avoid leaving this task until the end.
- 02 Personal Statement**
Tailor your personal statement to each programme, highlighting your fit and alignment with the department's expertise.
- 03 Writing Sample(s)**
Carefully select work that best showcases your abilities and that broadly aligns with the programme's research themes.
- 04 References**
Notify your referees in advance to ensure timely submission of recommendation letters.
- 05 Transcripts**
Make sure you have them, and in the correct format.
- 06 CV**
CV formats vary, and you might be given a template or structure to follow.

Contacting a supervisor

For many programmes, contacting a potential supervisor before submitting your formal application is an important part of the application process. Establishing early contact can provide insights into the compatibility of your research interests and the supervisor's expertise, and it can also help you understand the nuances of the programme's expectations. This guide provides advice for prospective applicants on how to effectively reach out to a potential supervisor.

Note that this is general advice; you should refer to your programme's website and the course directory for more detailed guidance.



Do I have to contact a supervisor before applying?

Some programmes require applicants to contact supervisors before submitting a formal application through the portal, while others do not. Before you start, carefully review the application requirements on your specific programme's website and in the course directory.

Contacting a supervisor

Usually, contacting a supervisor will either be:

- **Required:** for some programmes, you will need prior agreement from a supervisor to supervise your work. Some programmes stipulate that applications made without having a potential supervisor will be rejected.
- **Recommended:** for other programmes, informal contact is suggested but not mandatory. However, not discussing your application with a potential supervisor beforehand may put your application at a disadvantage. Additionally, contacting a supervisor can help you gain a better understanding of the application process.
- **Not needed:** For certain programmes, applicants are only required to name a supervisor that they wish to work with, which is taken into consideration by the department when allocating supervisors. If you do not name a supervisor, your application might enter a general pool for allocation to a supervisor.



What is the purpose of contacting a supervisor?

The purpose of this contact is to explore the possibility of academic staff supervising your research. These conversations help determine if there is a good fit between your research interests and theirs. It is an opportunity for potential supervisors to assess if they have the expertise to guide your research and there might be discussions around your preparation for PhD study. Additionally, supervisors can provide valuable insights into the application process and, in some cases, offer advice on how to develop or improve your research proposal. Ultimately, these discussions aim to establish whether they would be able to supervise your research if your application is successful.

There are disciplinary variations in how you approach working with supervisors. For example, in STEM areas, applicants might apply to work on specific projects, often alongside an academic or PI who will serve as their supervisor. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the current research projects of PIs.

In the social sciences, arts, and humanities, applicants usually apply to the programme, and may select a supervisor either before submitting their application or upon acceptance. Here, determining if there is a good fit between the supervisor's expertise and the applicant's research interests is essential.

If a supervisor is willing to supervise me, does that mean I have an offer?

No. Receiving an indication that a supervisor is willing to supervise your project does not guarantee an offer of admission. Potential supervisors cannot independently make final admission decisions for PhD programme; they can only express their willingness to supervise you.

What should I do to contact a Supervisor?

01

Background research

Familiarise yourself with the research conducted by the department and take the time to assess whether it aligns with your research goals. This critical self-assessment will ensure that you choose the right academic environment for your doctoral studies.

02

Identify potential supervisors

Check academic staff information webpages and supervisors' personal webpages to see whether your research interests align with their expertise. Identify projects or topics outlined and consider how your ideas could contribute to, extend, or build upon their work. Alternatively, you may want to start with your own ideas and explain how their work could overlap with yours.

03

Prepare your email

Prepare a concise and tailored email to each potential supervisor. Send your enquiry well in advance of the deadline; you have a better chance if you contact a supervisor several months in advance.

04

Follow up

Supervisors receive a large number of emails, so it may take some time for them to respond to you. Please be patient.

If you do not receive a response after two to three weeks, you may consider sending a polite follow-up email. If you still don't receive a reply, it might be best to explore other options.

Your email should include:

- a brief introduction, including your academic background and research interests;
- a summary of your proposed research project;
- why you are interested in their work and how you see your project fitting within their research area;
- your motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree.

You may like to enquire about their availability for supervision and include any relevant questions about their research group or the programme.

Attachments:

Think about documents that could support your application. This could include a CV, a brief research proposal outline or a short statement. Check the programme website for this information, but if not explicitly stated, the supervisor might reply to request further information.

Tone:

- Use a formal and polite tone throughout the email. Address the recipient by their academic title (e.g., Dr, Professor).
- Convey your genuine interest and enthusiasm for research.
- Avoid long and unnecessary details.
- Demonstrate that you have done your research by mentioning specific aspects of their work that align with your research interests.

A final note

Please do not be discouraged if you don't receive a positive response from a supervisor. Applications for doctoral studies at Cambridge are highly competitive, and the number of available places for each programme is limited. Supervisors also have limited capacity for taking on new students each year. Even if your application is strong, it may not be possible for your chosen supervisor to supervise you.

Writing a Personal Statement

A personal statement is often a required component of doctoral programme applications. It provides assessors with an insight into your motivation for pursuing doctoral study, as well as your skills and background. This statement offers you the opportunity to make your case for admission.

Before crafting your personal statement, carefully review the programme's website to determine if this document is required. You should also pay attention to any instructions regarding length, format, and topics to address. If the website does not provide specific guidance, consider addressing the following points.

1. Why you are interested in PhD study

- Give a sense of your **trajectory** and what led you to pursue PhD study. Reflect on your academic/ professional background and how it relates to your proposed research.
- Highlight your **passion** and **motivation** for your proposed research study. You may have professional, academic or personal motivations for wanting to conduct this research.
- You should also provide a sense of **what you hope to achieve** during the programme (e.g. conducting research on a specific topic, acquiring critical skills, collaborating with research teams, etc.) and possibly beyond your PhD. Showcase your readiness for PhD studies by demonstrating preparedness and commitment to your goals.

2. Why you are a strong candidate for PhD study

- Craft your statement to explain **why you are a strong candidate for success on the programme**. Provide evidence of how your past experiences have prepared you for success in this field. Discuss your skills and educational trajectory, emphasising academic experience such as research or teaching assistantships or practical experience with relevant topics or groups.
- If you lack direct experience, **present alternative competencies that demonstrate your potential for success** and highlight transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, or project management. For example: “My role as a project manager in a tech company allowed me to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. I successfully led a team to develop and implement a new software solution, which required meticulous planning, coordination, and execution”.
- You can also **outline a personal development plan** to maximise your chances. For example: “To bridge the gap between my current skills and the demands of a PhD programme, I have enrolled in advanced online courses in research methodologies and statistics. Additionally, I plan to attend relevant workshops and seek mentorship opportunities within the university”.
- Address any potential issues that assessors may have questions about, such as gaps in your employment or academic history, or lower grades. **As long as you feel comfortable disclosing this information**, addressing these issues can demonstrate to assessors your ability to overcome challenges. You don't need to provide full details of the challenges themselves; assessors will be interested to hear about the impact of the challenges and how you overcame them. You can use this opportunity to demonstrate your personal growth and progress over time.

3. Why this programme is a good fit for you

- Reflect on why this programme is the **ideal environment** for your academic growth and development of your research. Mention how your work will align with research already taking place in the department. Consider mentioning courses or training opportunities that align with your research interests.
- Ensure that you **tailor your statement** to each programme you are applying to; generic statements can reduce your chance of success. You want to signal your seriousness, which means researching the department beforehand to understand what it offers. Make a clear case for why you are applying to each programme.

Style and format:

Carefully check the guidance provided by the department and ensure that you address the points raised.

Aim for clarity, conciseness, and professionalism when writing your personal statement. Use plain language and maintain a balanced tone; avoid either underselling yourself or overstating your achievements.

Focus on effectively highlighting your strengths and achievements.

Tips for Writing a Research Proposal

The research proposal is a crucial component of a PhD application, providing insights into your potential for research and the strengths of your proposed work. It is important to note that research proposals vary significantly across disciplines, so it is essential to adhere to the conventions of your field. Some departments provide guidelines or examples of successful proposals; if available, closely follow this guidance alongside the following general advice.

Overview of the research proposal

The research proposal outlines the research question you intend to address or the hypothesis you plan to test. It also details the methods you will employ to collect and analyse data, and explains the significance of your work within your academic field.

Key elements to include:

- **Introduction:** Provide background information on the topic and rationale for your research.
- **Research question or hypothesis:** Clearly state the question your research seeks to answer or the hypothesis it aims to test.
- **Methodology:** Explain the sources, methods and techniques you plan to use for data collection and analysis.
- **Significance:** Explain the potential contributions your research will make to your field of study and its broader implications.
- **Timeline:** Outline a proposed schedule for completing the research.

When to start

Writing a compelling research proposal is a time-intensive process that requires thorough preparation. It involves reading extensively to identify gaps in the literature, exploring potential new methodologies, and/or determining suitable sources for your research. Therefore, it is advisable to begin the process well in advance of your application deadline. Starting early allows you time for reflection, iterative drafting, and seeking feedback from mentors and peers.

Format

Write your proposal in clear, jargon-free language. While technical terminology may be necessary for your project, remember that your proposal might be reviewed by assessors who are not specialists in your field. Revise your proposal multiple times and seek feedback to ensure your writing maintains an appropriate academic tone while remaining clear and accurate.

Statement of Interest

Some programmes may require a concise 'statement of interest'. In the statement of interest, you should focus on elaborating your research interests and how they align with the programme you are applying to.

You should avoid listing personal interests unrelated to academia.

Close the Gap

What to Expect After you Apply

Once the University has received your application, the department will begin the assessment process. While specific details may vary by programme, the key stages typically include initial application review, interviews, and final decisions. Be sure to thoroughly check university and departmental webpages for precise information about deadlines and the steps following your application submission.

This section provides general information to help you understand the steps following your application, including timelines, interview advice, and what to expect regarding application outcomes.

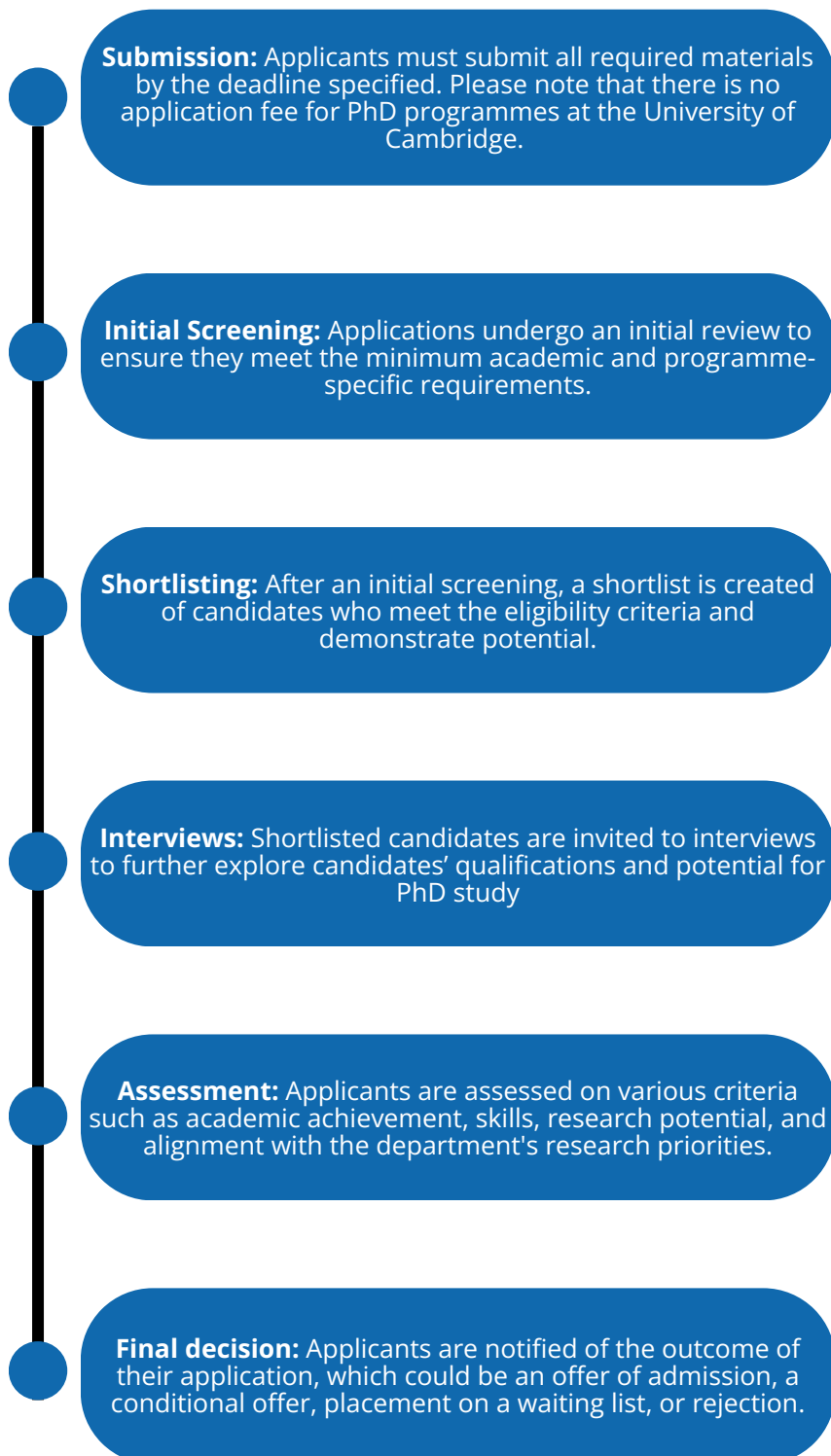


Stages of the application process

The assessment process for applications, including the instruments used and the number of individuals involved, can vary significantly by discipline and even by programme.

Please review, [What Happens After Applying?](#) for further details.

Here is a general overview of the typical stages in the application process:



Preparing for you PhD Interview

Interviews are a critical part of the admissions process. Adequate preparation and a clear understanding of the interview's purpose is crucial.

This style of interview may be unfamiliar to you if you have not previously been in a similar academic environment. This guide is designed to assist all applicants in navigating the interview process, with a particular focus on supporting applicants from underrepresented backgrounds. It includes practical advice on how to prepare and what to expect. Please carefully review University and departmental webpages for any specific guidance they may provide.

Purpose of the Interview

These interviews provide an opportunity for the academic staff to gain deeper insights into your research interests, motivations, and skills. They allow you to discuss your academic background, previous research and professional experiences, and how you envision your future research.

Interviews also allows assessor to consider whether academic staff within the department can effectively engage with and supervise your proposed doctoral project. Therefore, during the interview, expect questions that probe alignment with the programme, previous experience, research proposal, enthusiasm and motivation for doctoral study, as well as your knowledge and skills.



Interview Format

Interviews may be conducted online or in person, and you will be notified accordingly. For online interviews, ensure you are in a quiet location with a stable internet connection. For in-person interviews, arrive early to allow yourself plenty of time.

The number of academic staff conducting the interview can vary by department. For some programmes, you may be interviewed by your prospective supervisor(s) or the PI along with other academics. In other cases, the interview may be conducted by a panel that does not include your prospective supervisor.

Preparing for the Interview

1. Complete your background research

- **Potential supervisors and PIs:** It is essential to research potential supervisors and PIs to understand their work and see how your research interests and skills might align with and complement their existing research agendas. Ensure you are familiar not only with your prospective supervisors but also with other PIs in the department, as they may be part of your interview panel and the academic community you aim to join.
- **The department and programme:** Understanding the strengths of the department is crucial. You should be familiar with its research priorities in order to determine how your interests align with its broader agenda and capabilities. Most programmes, research projects, and labs have websites that showcase their research outputs and focal areas. Additionally, familiarise yourself with the structure of the programme to effectively discuss how it meets your training and learning needs.

2. Know your application

Interviewers will refer to your application materials during the interview, and it is likely that questions will stem from these documents. Interviewers meet numerous applicants and might not recall the specifics of your application, therefore you should be prepared to explain them in detail.

3. Prepare for the questions that you might be asked

Preparation is crucial for presenting yourself confidently during the interview; it can make all the difference in helping you stand out as a successful potential PhD student. Consider the following tips when anticipating questions:

- ✓ **Introductions:** Be ready to introduce yourself. Prepare a concise introduction focused on your academic interests and experience. Highlight your past experience and explain how it has led you to pursue research into your chosen topic.
- ✓ **Relevant experience:** Assessors aim to evaluate your potential for conducting and completing PhD research. They often do this by examining your past experiences. Reflect on your academic trajectory, professional experience, and how your skills have prepared you for your desired PhD project.
If transitioning from a professional background, explicitly connect your experiences to the skills that make you well-suited for the PhD programme. Emphasise specific skills such as research methodologies, data analysis, project management, or any other relevant expertise gained through your professional journey.
- ✓ **Research proposal and research skills:** Thoroughly review and understand every aspect of the research proposal you submitted with your application. Anticipate potential questions on the rationale, methodologies, expected outcomes, and the potential impact and significance of your proposed research. Be prepared to discuss technical aspects and key research articles. Demonstrate an understanding of the practicality and feasibility of your project, including a clear grasp of timelines and potential challenges.

Interviews

- ✓ **Compatibility with the department:** Be prepared to discuss how your research aligns with and contributes to the ongoing research within the department and by the potential supervisor. Reflect on the unique aspects of the lab or department that make it the optimal environment for the development of your research and professional growth.
- ✓ **Articulate your motivations:** Thoughtfully prepare answers to questions about your motivations and what you hope to achieve through the programme. Why do you want to do a PhD? Why do you want to research the topic you are proposing? What do you hope to achieve? The interviewers want to understand your motivation and ensure that you recognise the commitment involved in signing up for a PhD programme.
- ✓ **Training needs and funding:** You are not expected to be an expert in the field yet; gaps in your skills and knowledge are normal and expected. Consider your training needs and how they align with the resources and expertise available within the department. Be prepared to discuss your funding plans during the interview.
- ✓ **Do you have any questions?:** The panel will often invite you to ask questions. Use this opportunity to gain an insight into the department's resources, collaborative opportunities, and research experiences. Asking questions signals your enthusiasm and interest.

4. Mock interviews

Practice being asked questions by conducting practice interviews with people you know or with the careers service in your current institution. When answering questions, provide detailed responses and cite specific and relevant examples where appropriate.

Be mindful of your tone and aim to strike a balance between professionalism and authenticity. Approach the interview as an opportunity to share your research passions and interests with individuals who share similar interests.

5. Sample Questions

Introductions	Tell me about yourself.
Relevant Experience	Can you discuss a project you've worked on that relates to this field? How has your previous research prepared you for this PhD?
Research Proposal and Academic Skills	What drives your interest in science? Which theoretical/methodological approach are you interested in? Describe your current research project. Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced during your previous research and how you overcame it?
Alignment with the Department	Why are you interested in this programme? How do your research interests align with our department's expertise? Which PI or professor are you interested in working with? How does our specific programme fit into your long-term career plans?
Articulate your Motivation	Why do you believe pursuing a PhD is necessary for your career goals?
Training Needs and Funding	What training do you feel you need to succeed in this programme? How do you plan to seek funding or grants to support your research?
Do you have any questions?	How does the department support students' professional development? What resources are available to support research in this department?

Additional Resources

Ransey, E., et al. (2023). A practical guide to graduate school interviewing for historically excluded individuals. *American Journal of Physiology-Heart and Circulatory Physiology* 2023 324:6, H786-H790.

The Outcome of Your Application

Around 90% of applications are considered by the department within 12 weeks. Some departments wait until the course deadline has passed and consider all applications together, while other departments will consider applications as soon as they are received. If your application is submitted by the December or January funding deadlines, you should receive a formal decision on your application before the end of March. The majority of offers are made in February and March. A final decision on your application will be sent to you by email.

Please, refer to the [Postgraduate Study](#) website.

Dealing with Rejection

Rejection, unfortunately, is a common outcome in the application process. While it is natural to feel disappointed by this decision, it is important to remember that it does not reflect your self-worth or research abilities.

Admissions decisions are complex and influenced by various factors, some of which may have nothing to do with the quality of your application. Rejection could be due to limited supervisor capacity or your research topic not aligning with the department's focus.

Keep an open mind, try other programmes, or reapply later. Finding the right programme for you might require more than one attempt.

AIM: PhD

AIM: PhD is a 6-month, online programme to assist applicants from underrepresented groups with their application to doctoral study at the University of Cambridge.

The programme offers applicants personalised support from University admissions staff and PhD students. We aim to support participants to submit a competitive application that reflects their potential for doctoral study.

Benefits for participants include:

- One-on-one mentoring from a current PhD student in your subject area.
- Group sessions covering topics related to the application process
- Insights into student life at Cambridge
- Practical tips for enhancing your application

For more information, eligibility, and application details, please visit: postgraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/aim-phd.

Other Resources

- Jessica McCrory Calarco. 2020. *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*. Princeton.
- Gardner, S. K., & Holley, K. A. (2011). "Those invisible barriers are real": The Progression of First-Generation Students Through Doctoral Education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.529791>

Good luck

Close the Gap is supported by the Office for Students and Research England under the 'Improving Black, Asian and minority ethnic students' access to postgraduate research projects' funding stream. Oxford and Cambridge have also contributed support for this project.

The focus of Close the Gap is on organisational change that will shift the admissions cultures in Oxford and Cambridge to reduce the offer gap and to promote a socially just and inclusive environment for world-leading research.



Website

closethegap.ox.ac.uk
