



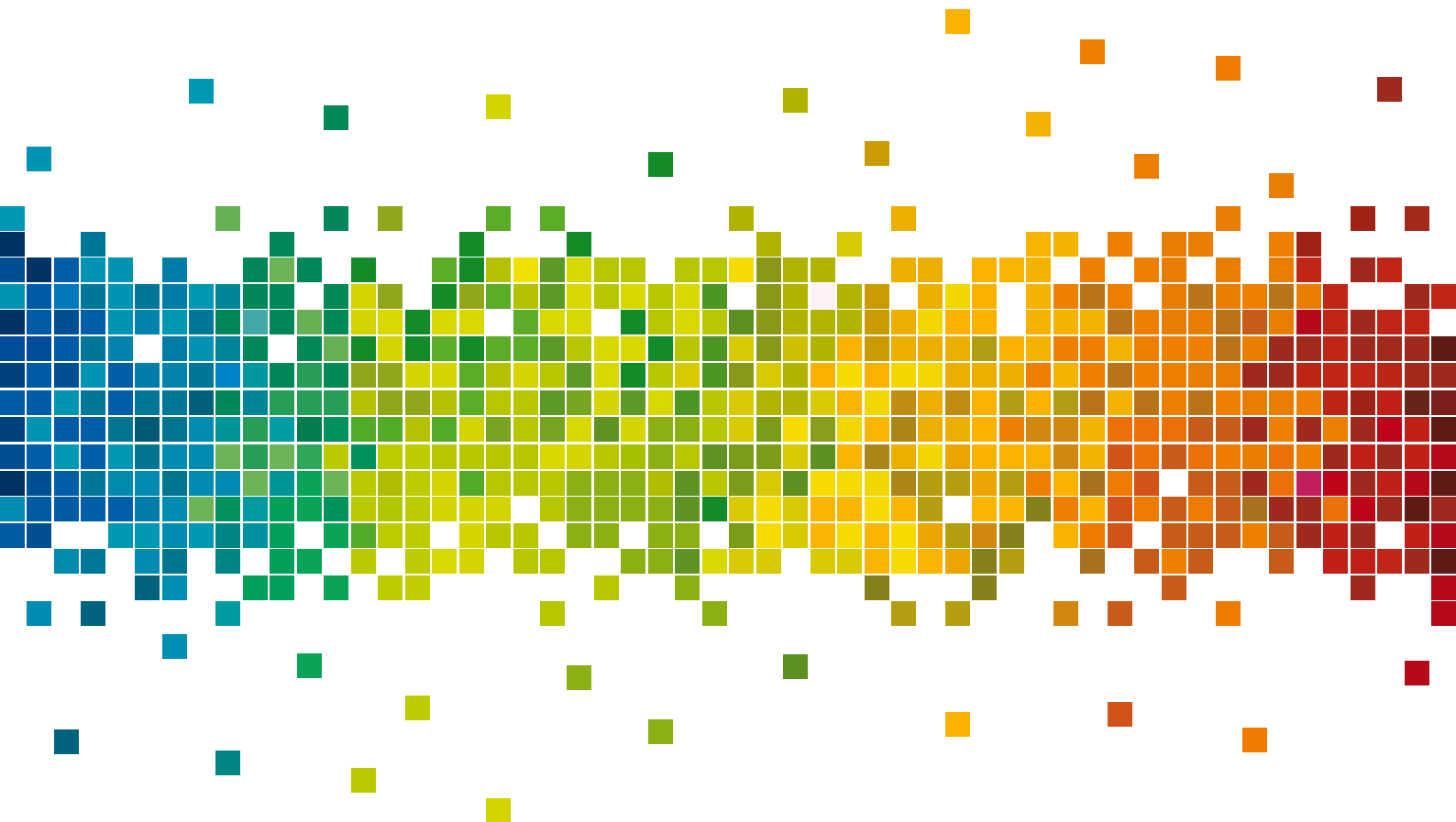
national union of students



QAA

# The UK doctorate:

a guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates



# Contents

<b>What is the purpose of this guide?</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>The UK doctoral qualification</b>	<b>3</b>
What is a doctoral degree?	3
What is the difference between a doctorate and other types of HE qualification?	4
Why are there different doctoral qualifications?	4
Are there national standards for the management of UK doctoral degrees?	4
<b>Routes into doctoral study</b>	<b>6</b>
How do I apply to do a doctorate?	6
What are the entry requirements for doctoral degrees?	6
Can I study part-time or as a distance learner?	7
Can I get academic credit for undertaking a doctorate?	7
Can I switch institution? If so, will the research I have already be done be recognised?	7
What difference does it make if I am an international candidate?	7
<b>Funding and finance</b>	<b>9</b>
How much will the doctorate cost?	9
Will I be able to access funding for the doctorate?	9
Will I be able to undertake part-time work as a full-time doctoral candidate?	9
What happens if I don't complete my degree within the time that I have funding?	10
<b>The doctoral experience</b>	<b>11</b>
What is the role of my supervisor(s)?	11
How do I learn how to do research?	11
Is the doctorate just about doing research?	12
How will my progress be monitored?	12
How is the doctorate assessed?	12
How long is a doctoral thesis?	13
How am I represented at my institution?	13
<b>Questions to consider</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Sources of help and information</b>	<b>16</b>
Books	16
Online resources	17
Other resources	17
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>18</b>

# The UK doctorate:

## a guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates

### What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide to the UK doctorate is intended to be helpful to prospective and current **doctoral candidates** who are studying for, or thinking about studying for, a doctorate (doctoral degree) in the United Kingdom. It gives information about the guidance and regulation that provides the framework for doctoral degrees. It is a companion to the publication *Doctoral degree characteristics*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/doctoral/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/doctoral/Pages/default.aspx).

#### Doctoral candidates

Throughout this guide we refer to those registered on a UK doctoral programme as 'doctoral candidates' rather than doctoral students. The consensus is that this is the most suitable term to use, even though in some institutions a distinction is made between 'student' and 'candidate' depending on whether the individual has successfully completed some kind of transfer of status stage. Some institutions may use different terms, for example, 'researcher' to describe an individual undertaking a research degree.

You may find the doctoral degree characteristics document useful if you wish to know more detail about the different types of UK doctoral awards, including the history and development of the different doctoral awards in the UK. This shorter guide may help to inform your decision if you are thinking about whether or not to undertake a doctorate. It may also suggest topics to consider or seek further information about if you are a current doctoral candidate.

Talking with students demonstrated how important doctoral candidates thought it was to take a proactive approach in seeking out information. Part of the doctoral experience is about how concepts evolve through research or how the practice of research translates into a contribution to knowledge. Doctoral candidates gained a deeper understanding of this as they progressed along their doctoral journey and developed as researchers. Doctoral candidates reported that taking the initiative to seek out information about their studies helped in this process and was almost always a useful experience. This guide is designed to contribute to that.

Sources of information that doctoral candidates said that they had used to inform their decisions during various stages of their study included:

- supervisors and other academic staff
- librarians, and other university staff
- professional and subject discipline websites
- professional peers and senior colleagues
- books on doctoral study
- other current and prospective doctoral candidates.

Gaining insight into the research topic they wished to study, into research practice, and into the experience of being a doctoral candidate in a specific institution, subject discipline or professional context were also thought to be important. This guide is unlikely to be able to answer all your questions. Indeed many of the answers to your queries will be institutional/subject specific or personal to you. However, this guide may help both prospective and registered doctoral candidates to decide what further questions they might want to pursue.

To help you with finding more information we have asked experienced supervisors and other advisors (through the UK Council for Graduate Education, [www.ukcge.ac.uk](http://www.ukcge.ac.uk)) to recommend useful sources of help. These are listed at the end of this guide. It is not a definitive list; if you have found something particularly helpful and it is not included please do tell us about it.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the National Union of Students (NUS; [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)) have created this guide in recognition of the differently structured UK degrees that have developed to accommodate the needs of a diverse student population. The questions in this guide were informed by extensive consultation with current and prospective doctoral candidates and with student representatives. We are grateful for their help with this work. Particular thanks are due to Dr Debbie McVitty at NUS.

# The UK doctoral qualification

## What is a doctoral degree?

A doctoral degree is the highest academic qualification that an institution can award following an agreed programme of study. Registration periods for a UK doctorate are typically four years full-time or six to eight years part-time. A candidate is examined on the basis of a thesis, portfolio, artefact(s), clinical practice or other output which must demonstrate the research question, critically evaluate the extent to which it has been addressed, and make an **original contribution to knowledge**. In the UK a doctoral qualification is awarded by reaching or exceeding the required level of achievement.

### Original contribution to knowledge

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge that is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

The registration period indicates a common understanding that typically a research project takes this period to complete; less and it is unlikely to reach doctoral standard, except in exceptional circumstances; much longer and it is likely to be unnecessarily grand in scope or complexity for the award of the doctoral degree.

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with autonomous higher education providers (universities) and research institutes. Many have the power to award their own degrees. However, they do so within the context of a **national framework** that underpins higher education.

### National framework

A framework is a published formal structure for establishing the comparative levels of different types of qualification. UK national frameworks reflect the importance of situating UK doctorates in a wider European or international context, particularly the Salzburg principles and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which contains the original 'Dublin descriptors' frequently referenced by UK institutions.

Doctoral qualification descriptors are included in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (QAA, 2008) and *The framework for higher education qualifications in Scotland* (QAA, 2001), part of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), both of which are maintained by QAA. These frameworks provide qualification descriptors that summarise the research-specific and personal attributes agreed by the higher education sector as a minimum level of achievement for any doctoral graduate. One of the purposes of having such descriptors is to achieve equivalence of academic standards across doctoral awards by summarising the key attributes expected of a doctoral graduate. Integration of the attributes relevant to the doctoral

level with those required of more experienced researchers has recently been established in the **Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF)**.

### **Researcher Development Framework**

The Vitae Researcher Development Framework has been developed to guide researchers in their professional development. It enables researchers to set aspirational goals to become a successful researcher during their doctorate and beyond. It was developed through interviews with successful researchers in a range of disciplines. It encourages doctoral candidates to identify their strengths and prioritise their professional development. It enables them 'to consider skills and experiences that will enhance their career prospects and articulate their knowledge, behaviours and attributes to employers' ([www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfresearchers](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfresearchers)).

## **What is the difference between a doctorate and other types of HE qualification?**

The experience of undertaking a doctorate varies for every candidate; however, doctoral candidates all share the experience of creating knowledge through the practice of independent research and scholarship. This creation of new knowledge or of applying existing knowledge in a new way is not expected in the same way at undergraduate or taught postgraduate level. Doctoral candidates operate at a level of independence and self-direction that would not be expected of an undergraduate or taught postgraduate student.

Doctoral candidates learn about research - the means by which knowledge is created and extended - through undertaking independent research, under the guidance of one or more supervisors, and normally within a wider institutional, professional or subject-based research community.

Holders of a doctoral qualification would be expected to be able to continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches. They would also be able to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

## **Why are there different doctoral qualifications?**

Doctoral degrees fulfil a wide range of purposes. Whereas originally the purpose of acquiring a doctoral degree might have been seen solely as a way of gaining entry to the academic profession this is now just one of the many options available to doctoral graduates. To accommodate this diversity different doctoral qualifications have evolved. Doctoral qualifications awarded in the UK include the PhD, the professional doctorate, the practice-based doctorate and the doctorate by publication. You can find out more about differences between doctoral degrees in the publication *Doctoral degree characteristics* available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/doctoral/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/doctoral/Pages/default.aspx).

All doctoral degrees prepare the candidate to make a contribution to knowledge through original and independent research. However, the context in which doctoral candidates undertake their research may vary between the different qualifications available, as well as the way the programme is structured. Doctoral candidates come from diverse backgrounds, with different aspirations and requirements in the way they study. It is important that, if you are thinking of entering doctoral research, you explore the different types of doctoral qualifications available and consider which of these will best suit your needs. Undertaking doctoral research is a highly individual experience.

## **Are there national standards for the management of UK doctoral degrees?**

Institutions that offer research degree programmes need to align with the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, in particular *Section 1: Postgraduate*

research programmes ([www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-section-1.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-section-1.aspx)). This section of the *Code of practice* covers the following areas:

- the need for institutional frameworks, policies and regulations on postgraduate research programmes that students and staff can access
- the need for a high-quality research environment to support postgraduate research
- clear, accessible and transparent admissions procedures
- clear communication of the entitlements and responsibilities of postgraduate research students
- induction and the provision of information to students
- appointment of supervisors and management of supervision processes
- formal and informal review and monitoring of student progress
- provision of opportunities for personal and professional development
- clear, robust and fair assessment procedures
- management of complaints and appeals.

The management and mode of delivery of the doctoral programme will vary depending on the qualification and the subject of study. A number of institutions have **graduate schools** or **doctoral schools** or may be linked to a **centre for doctoral training**. These help to give structure to the doctoral programmes, enable more coherent research skills training and provide support for postgraduates.

Information about the regulations for specific programmes will be provided by individual institutions. Usually more information about where to find these can be found in an institution's 'handbook for research degrees' or in a similar publication that may be available on its website.

# Routes into doctoral study

## How do I apply to do a doctorate?

There is no national application scheme for doctoral degrees. Normally, prospective doctoral candidates apply directly to the institution(s) of their choice. Every institution sets its own requirements for entry and application, which may differ somewhat across subjects, and these are clearly published (for example on institutional websites). Some institutions accept doctoral applications all year round, while others have application deadlines linked to specific start dates, typically October, January and April.

Candidates often have to find their own fees and maintenance funding, and demonstrate evidence of adequate funding before taking up their place. However, some institutions can award doctoral funding. In particular, some subjects may have a bursary or finance system integrated within the application process; if this is the case specific deadlines usually apply.

Some institutions will advertise for a doctoral candidate to be attached to a specific project or to undertake relatively specific research within that project. Doctoral studentships of this kind are likely to have fees and maintenance funding attached. Criteria for application will be described in the advertisement for any such studentship.

If you do not intend to apply for a specific studentship you may need to find out if the institution you wish to apply to can offer doctoral supervision in the particular area in which you wish to undertake your research. Institution staff research profiles are often available on institutions' websites.

Applicants for doctoral study may be asked to supply any or all of the following in support of their application:

- a research project outline or statement of intent
- evidence of ability to be able to undertake independent research
- degree transcripts
- academic or professional references
- writing samples or a portfolio of creative work.

Interviews for admission to doctoral programmes are commonplace. Individual institutions will make clear what is required for their own application process. You may be required to upload the relevant documentation in support of your application via an online application process.

## What are the entry requirements for doctoral degrees?

Individual institutions specify entry requirements for their doctoral degrees. Increasingly, doctoral candidates possess a **master's degree** but in some subjects it is usual to begin a doctoral programme with a bachelor's degree or, in some circumstances, its professional equivalent.

### Master's degree

There is variation in the types of master's qualifications offered in the UK, but, like doctoral qualifications, master's programmes align with the national frameworks. For more information on master's degrees see the QAA publication *Master's degree characteristics* ([www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx)).

Some institutions offer a combined master's and doctoral award (sometimes known as the '1+3' model) that enables a candidate to undertake a master's degree and, subsequent to satisfactory progress, enter directly into doctoral research at the same institution.

It is not always necessary to hold an undergraduate degree in the same subject as that applied for at doctoral level and, although a minimum standard for admittance to doctoral study will be required, there may also be some flexibility depending on a candidate's experience, background and preparedness for doctoral research. Prospective doctoral candidates need to check with individual institutions about the specific requirements at the institution at which they wish to study.



## Can I study part-time or as a distance learner?

Different modes of study are possible for different doctoral programmes. It will depend on the institution, intended subject of study and the qualification for which you are registered. You will need to explore whether part-time or distance learning is possible at your preferred institution(s), and how these modes of study affect the form your doctoral programme will take. You may need to look into a number of programmes before you find one that suits your specific needs.

It is important that, as a part-time or distance learner, you are still able to engage with a wider research community by some means, as this is a crucial part of learning how to be effective in research. Different institutions have different ways of supporting this. Vitae has developed resources for part-time doctoral candidates: [www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/74571/Part-time-researcher.html](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/74571/Part-time-researcher.html).

## Can I get academic credit for undertaking a doctorate?

It is unusual for doctoral degrees to carry **academic credit**, due to the nature of the qualification and its basis in original research. It may be possible in some cases to gain credit for elements of doctoral work, such as assessed research skills training. This will vary by institution.

### Academic credit

Academic credit is a means of quantifying and recognising learning, and is awarded when you meet a specific set of learning outcomes. Among other things, academic credit enables institutions within the UK or the wider world to recognise how far a candidate has progressed through a qualification. Credit is not normally assigned to doctoral degrees because of the diverse and individual nature of research projects. Further information about academic credit can be found at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/Pages/Academic-Credit.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/Pages/Academic-Credit.aspx).

If a doctoral candidate cannot complete the programme of doctoral study or does not reach the minimum required level of achievement, it might be possible to be awarded a lower-level qualification, such as a postgraduate certificate or diploma. Any credit that has been awarded to candidates for successful completion of assessed elements of research training may contribute to this. Details about any such awards will be detailed in individual institutions' regulations.

## Can I switch institution? If so, will the research I have already be done be recognised?

Sometimes circumstances may change: a doctoral supervisor may move institution and a doctoral candidate may wish to follow, or for other reasons a candidate may wish to change the institution at which he/she is registered. Transfers between institutions and recognition of research already undertaken are possible but subject to negotiation and agreement between the candidate, his or her supervisor(s), the institution at which he/she is registered and the institution to which he/she wishes to move.

Institutions may have generic rules and policies governing transfers, but most likely these requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Permission for transfer of intellectual property might be required.

## What difference does it make if I am an international candidate?

The UK welcomes applicants to doctoral programmes from all over the globe, and most institutions can offer a truly international research environment. International applicants need to be sponsored by an approved education provider. A list of approved providers is available on the UKBA website. It is an applicant's responsibility to meet the requirements of the Point Based System Tier 4 visa requirements, details of which are at <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/visas-immigration/studying/>.

The visa process can take some time, so it is advisable to apply as early as possible. Applicants will need to have a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) for the doctoral programme from their chosen institution and meet requirements for English language and funding. Individual institutions will specify in the information they provide for applicants to doctoral study whether they have any English language requirements additional to the visa requirements. Some provide English language learning support for candidates once they have registered.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs ([www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)) has a wealth of useful information for current and prospective international students and doctoral candidates studying in the UK. Many institutions have an International Office, which can offer advice about living and studying at that institution.

# Funding and finance

## How much will the doctorate cost?

The fees charged for various programmes of doctoral study are variable, but are usually clearly published on institutional websites. International candidates can in most cases expect to pay more than candidates not domiciled in the UK or in other EU member states. Some institutions will levy further fees, such as lab bench fees, beyond the basic tuition fee. For a specific programme at a particular institution you would have to ask whether these additional fees would apply and how much they might be.

Doctoral candidates will also need to pay for maintenance as well as fees, and this will vary in different parts of the UK depending on the cost of living. Individual institutions will be able to advise you in more detail.

## Will I be able to access funding for the doctorate?

Availability of funding for doctoral study depends on subject discipline, institution, and nationality/residency. You should check eligibility criteria for any advertised funding source or studentship. Many doctoral candidates do find sponsorship of some kind or another, but others have to pay for everything themselves.

The most common sources of doctoral funding in the UK are as follows.

- **Research council funding** (usually obtained through institutions). Details can be found on institutional websites or the website of the relevant research council for the subject discipline.
- **Institution funding.** Institutions may have full studentship, fee waiver, and bursary or scholarship schemes, usually allocated via an open application process. Details should be available on individual institutions' websites.
- **Charitable or private funding.** Details about organisations and trusts that offer doctoral funding may be harder to come by, unless the funding organisation is a large and well-known one such as the Wellcome Trust or the Leverhulme Trust. Academics or practitioners in the discipline or profession may have specific advice.
- **Collaborative funding arrangements.** In some cases doctoral studentships are offered in partnership between an institution or research organisation and an external body, for example an industrial company. Details of such arrangements are likely to be provided in particular studentship advertisements.
- **Employer.** Some employers will co-fund employees to undertake doctoral study, either as part of an organisation-wide staff development policy or on an ad-hoc basis.
- **Self-funding.** Self-funding is more common in some disciplines than others. Self-funded doctoral candidates may fund their study through private loans, savings or paid employment.

## Will I be able to undertake part-time work as a full-time doctoral candidate?

Doctoral research is highly demanding and may leave limited time or energy to pursue part-time work. However, it is not unusual for doctoral candidates to undertake part-time work, especially academic-related work such as teaching, for professional development purposes, or out of financial necessity. Some disciplines (sciences) expect their students to become laboratory assistants while others have specific teaching assistant posts linked to doctoral studentships.

Specific criteria attached to research studentships may limit the number of hours per week a full-time doctoral candidate is permitted to work. Six hours per week is often the maximum in these cases, but you would need to check individual institutional regulations and/or the relevant funding organisation. It is not possible to work full-time while registered as a full-time doctoral candidate.

## What happens if I don't complete my degree within the time that I have funding?

In the ideal scenario, doctoral candidates complete their research within the period of funding. However, you may hear reference to **the 'writing-up' period**, typically referring to the final few months of the doctoral process; for some candidates this may extend beyond the period of funding.

### The 'writing-up' period

'Writing-up period' is to some extent a false concept, as doctoral candidates can expect to produce written work throughout their doctoral degree. However, there is often a particularly intense period of writing towards the end of the process once the majority of the research is complete.

If this is the case, funding bodies are highly unlikely to extend funds to cover the remaining time, and funded doctoral candidates should be aware that they could find themselves without financial support in the final stages of their doctoral programme. Some sources of funding do, however, include provision for a limited amount of funding to cover an additional period. You would need to check the detail of your own funding arrangements.

Institutional practice can vary in applying fee charges and in allowing access to institutional resources during any additional periods of registration.

# The doctoral experience

The questions below tackle commonalities in the elements of the doctoral experience, but this experience will be shaped by a doctoral candidate's own background, aspirations, subject and mode of study and in particular by individual institutional regulations. It is advisable that new doctoral candidates attend the institutional induction for their programme. Institutional handbooks, and/or individual institutions' research degree regulations will be useful to refer to throughout a programme.

## What is the role of my supervisor(s)?

As a doctoral candidate you have the primary responsibility for the direction and progress of your research. Your supervisors act as expert guides and professional mentors as you develop both your research project and yourself as a research practitioner. All institutions have regulations on the role and responsibilities of the supervisors; it would be sensible to familiarise yourself with these and discuss them with your supervisors to ensure a consensus of expectations.

The amount of contact you will have with your supervisors and the nature of that contact is determined in part by institutional regulation and the subject you are studying, but also by negotiation between supervisor and candidate. National consensus on good practice recommends that doctoral candidates have a minimum of one main supervisor but that supervisor will normally be part of a supervisory team. The style and approach of different supervisors will vary.

It is also useful for doctoral candidates to recognise the limitations in their supervisors' role and the value of the wider research community and systems for institutional support of researchers. Subject librarians, experts in information and communication technology, researcher developers, members of academic staff and professionals/practitioners in the field, and other doctoral candidates and early-career researchers are invaluable sources of information, advice and guidance as you progress through your doctoral programme.

Institutions also have formal systems for student support such as an international office, counselling service, provision for students with disabilities, welfare and academic advice service, students' union and finance office. The institutional induction process should make you aware of these and how to access them.

## How do I learn how to do research?

Doctoral candidates learn to research primarily through undertaking research under the expert guidance of supervisors, and are supported through training in research skills and methods, which is usually provided by the institution.

Doctoral candidates are expected to develop as professional researchers in the course of their doctoral programme, and institutional support is provided for the development of a wide range of professional transferable skills such as public engagement and communication of research, enterprise and entrepreneurship, teaching, project management, leadership and teamwork skills. How you engage most effectively with this provision will depend on your experience and aspirations, and through discussions with your supervisors around your specific learning and skills needs.

The researcher development organisation Vitae ([www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers)) has a wealth of resources about the process of doing a doctorate ([www.vitae.ac.uk/pgr](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgr) and [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips)), including relationships with supervisors, professional development of early career researchers and the publication series 'What do researchers do?' ([www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd)) which provides information about the career destinations of doctoral graduates.

Vitae is also responsible for developing the Researcher Development Framework ([www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf)) which 'articulates the knowledge, behaviours and attributes' of successful researchers and encourages them to realise their potential.

## Is the doctorate just about doing research?

Undertaking original research is the most important aspect of a doctoral degree. However, many doctoral candidates also engage in a range of other activities related to their subject disciplines or to the wider institutional or research environment. Such activities and experiences support the personal and professional development of researchers as well as being a formal means of developing as institutional researchers.

The way in which you engage with activities outside your research project will depend on the subject, the programme for which you are registered and personal aspirations.

Activities additional to research might include the following:

- **extension of subject or technical knowledge** through supplementary taught courses, training provision or studying another language
- **dissemination of research knowledge** through conference and seminar posters and presentations, publication of research in journals or elsewhere, public engagement or knowledge exchange/entrepreneurship activity
- **paid or unpaid employment** such as teaching or lecturing, professional work experience, internships, time spent in industry or similar
- **services to the academic or professional community** through acting as a student representative to a university committee, reviewing for a journal, organising seminars, conferences or other events or engaging in student or subject societies or with a professional body.

## How will my progress be monitored?

A doctoral candidate's progress is reviewed both informally and formally on a regular basis. Institutional regulations and programme handbooks will give the detail of how this happens at individual institutions. Review and monitoring processes may involve the submission of written work, documentation of training received or a personal development review and/or a progress interview or oral examination. Usually it will be your supervisor who is responsible for monitoring your day-to-day progress but for formal annual 'upgrade' or review an independent assessor or committee may have oversight of the process.

In cases where doctoral candidates are registered initially on a probationary basis or for an MPhil, progress will be monitored through a formal upgrade or confirmation of doctoral status process.

Doctoral candidates may be required to leave the doctoral programme if they do not demonstrate evidence of satisfactory progress.

## How is the doctorate assessed?

The monitoring and review processes as outlined above play a part in the assessment of a doctoral candidate. However it is the doctoral examination where all the candidate's achievements and relevant attributes are tested: they will all contribute to the candidate's success or otherwise.

Doctoral assessment includes a thorough review of the submitted written materials (and artefacts if appropriate), normally followed by a **viva voce**, or oral examination, which remains a significant feature and the form of summative assessment experienced by most doctoral candidates. The supervisor has no role in the examination of doctoral awards that he/she has supervised.

### **Viva voce**

The viva voce ('viva') or oral examination provides doctoral examiners with the opportunity to probe the candidate on the research he/she has conducted, exploring how the research makes a contribution to knowledge, why specific methods were chosen to conduct the research, whether the data is robust and whether the conclusions derive from the data gathered. The viva process is governed by individual institutional regulations.

The appointment of at least one **external examiner** is required for each oral doctoral examination. External examining is a key feature in UK quality assurance in helping to demonstrate the equivalence of academic standards. The external examiner(s) at a doctoral oral examination helps to provide the assurance that the process is appropriate and that the candidate has met the required standard for the award of the doctoral degree.

### **External examiner**

An external examiner is an independent expert - usually an academic in the appropriate subject area from a different institution - who assesses the doctoral candidate alongside one or more internal assessors. Doctoral candidates can expect to have some input into the selection of their external examiner. For more information about external examining see: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-Section-4.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-Section-4.aspx).

All institutions have regulations and processes to ensure the doctoral assessment is fair and transparent. Institutions will provide candidates with information and opportunities to prepare for their doctoral examination. It is very important to be aware of your own institution's guidance.

Following the viva, the candidate may be awarded an outright pass, or asked to make minor revisions to their work. It is also possible to be asked to make major revisions before the submitted materials achieve the appropriate standard. It is possible to fail the doctoral degree, but institutional monitoring processes should in most cases guard against this outcome.

### **How long is a doctoral thesis?**

A doctoral candidate will be examined on the basis of a 'traditional' thesis, a portfolio, artefact(s), clinical practice and/or other output. The body of work presented must demonstrate the research question and a critical evaluation of the extent to which it has been addressed. The amount of written material required will therefore vary. A doctoral thesis is usually between 50,000 and 100,000 words, with variations according to subject discipline, type of project and qualification. In particular for professional and practice-based doctorates, and for the doctorate by published work, the length and arrangement of the final assessment will vary from the more traditional thesis commonly submitted by a PhD candidate. It is important to check the assessment criteria and regulations at the institution at which you are registered.

At most institutions candidates will require special dispensation to submit a doctoral thesis that falls outside the parameters set by the institution for that subject or award.

### **How am I represented at my institution?**

A system of representation for doctoral candidates can often be an indication that the institution is committed to providing the best possible environment in which to study for a research degree. A doctoral candidate should be aware of his/her responsibilities to participate in these processes.

Students engage in representation systems in order to:

- inform their institution of issues raised by the student body so that these can be resolved
- propose means or initiatives by which the student experience could be improved
- ensure that the student voice is heard in discussions of institutional policy and that students are able to influence the decisions of university managers and leaders.

Postgraduate or doctoral representation systems can take any or all of the following forms, as appropriate, and may integrate with social provision for postgraduate students:

- departmental representatives on staff-student liaison committees
- representation on departmental, graduate school or university committees that have oversight of research degrees
- postgraduate representatives on the students' union executive committee

- a postgraduate student society, association or committee
- postgraduate forums, events or online systems designed to solicit postgraduate feedback.

Doctoral candidates automatically become members of their institution's students' union, which in most cases will be affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS; [www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)).

Students' unions facilitate the academic representation of students at their institution, as well as providing advice and advocacy on academic matters, and provision for co-curricular activities.

For information on how students' unions support the experience of postgraduate students, including doctoral candidates, see the NUS postgraduate campaign: [www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/postgrad](http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/postgrad). NUS is an affiliate of the European Students' Union ([www.esib.org](http://www.esib.org)) and of Eurodoc ([www.eurodoc.net](http://www.eurodoc.net)).



# Questions to consider

Before taking up your place on a doctoral programme, and throughout the programme itself, you will inevitably have many questions about the experience and how you will navigate through the process. The questions below provide a general starting point; you will also have personal questions you might need to ask that relate to your chosen subject or topic for research, the specific doctoral qualification and your chosen institution.

Before starting, and at points throughout the doctoral process, you will want to think about your own motivation for doctoral study, your progress and your long-term aspirations, and consider how you can shape and direct your experience so that you can achieve your goals.

1. What does the institution expect of its research students in terms of time spent researching, undertaking training or attending 'taught' elements, and other responsibilities?
2. What are the roles and responsibilities of doctoral supervision at the institution, and what provision is there for change of supervisor if my supervisor leaves or takes a sabbatical?
3. What facilities and resources am I likely to need for my project and will I be able to access them?
4. What costs am I likely to incur that are not included in the annual tuition fee, such as travel for research purposes, conference attendance, bench fees or specialist equipment?
5. How will I be supported in finding opportunities to attend conferences, give presentations and publish?
6. Will I be given opportunities to teach, and if so, how much teaching is available/expected, and what support will be available to me as a novice teacher?
7. What support is available (in my subject) for research and professional transferable skills development?
8. How does the institution promote an engaging and interdisciplinary postgraduate research environment?
9. How are the concerns of doctoral students represented at the institution?
10. What provision is there for arranged suspension of study (for example, for parental leave) and will I be able to return to my research if I suspend my study for some reason?
11. What happens if I don't complete my research?
12. What employment opportunities are available for someone researching in my field and how will this doctoral qualification enhance my career prospects?

# Sources of help and information

To help you with finding more information we have asked experienced supervisors and other advisers (through the UK Council for Graduate Education) to recommend sources of help and information. This is not a definitive list. If you have found something to be particularly helpful that is not mentioned here please do tell us about it.

## Books

- Becker, H (1986) *Writing for social scientists*; second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Bentley, P (2006) *The PhD Application Handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Blaxhill, L *The Alternative Guide to Postgraduate Funding*
- Blaxter, L, Hughes, C and Tight, M (2007) *How to Research*; third edition. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Brown, S, McDowell, L and Race, P (1995) *500 Tips for Research Students*, London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page
- Cryer, P (2006) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*; third edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Delamont, S and Atkinson P (2004) *Successful Research Careers: A Practical Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Dunleavy, P (2003) *Authoring a PhD: How to plan, draft, write and finish and doctoral thesis or dissertation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Foskett, N and Foskett, R (2006) *Postgraduate Study in the UK: The International Student's Guide*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications
- Gilbert, N (ed.) (2006) *From Postgraduate to Social Scientist*. London: Sage
- Hall, G and Longman, J (eds) (2008) *The Postgraduate's Companion*. London: Sage Publications
- Lee, N-J (2009) *Achieving your professional doctorate: A handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Leonard, D (2001) *A Women's Guide to Doctoral Studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Marshall, S and Green, N (2004) *Your PhD companion*. Oxford: How To Books
- Matthiesen, J and Binder, M (2009) *How to Survive Your Doctorate. What Others Don't Tell You*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill
- Mitchell, S and Riddle, M (2000) *Improving the Quality of Argument in Higher Education*. London: Middlesex University
- Murray, R (2002) *How To Write A Thesis*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Murray, R (2009) *How to Survive Your Viva*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Phillips, E M and Pugh, D S (2010) *How to get a PhD*; fifth edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Potter, S (ed) (2006) *Doing Postgraduate research*. London: Sage Publications
- Rugg, G and Petre, M (2004) *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Thomson, P and Walker, M (2010) *The Routledge Doctoral Student's Companion: Getting to Grips with Research in Education and the Social Sciences*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Trafford, V and Leshem, S (2008) *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate by Focusing on your Viva from the Start*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Williams, K, Bethell, E, Lawton, J, Parfitt, C, Richardson, M, Rowe, V (2010) *Planning your PhD*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

## Online resources

The University of Oxford's centre for excellence in preparing for academic practice:  
[www.apprise.ox.ac.uk](http://www.apprise.ox.ac.uk)

The Vitae programme postgraduate researchers' website:  
[www.vitae.ac.uk/1218/Postgraduate-researchers.html](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1218/Postgraduate-researchers.html)

<http://vitae.ac.uk/researchers/3909/GRADBritain-online-magazine.html>

Electronic Theses Online Service (Ethos):  
<http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do;jsessionid=DFAC76B40534CF8E62662E0F67196125>

A career resource for arts and humanities PhD researchers:  
[www.beyondthephd.co.uk](http://www.beyondthephd.co.uk)

A postgraduate community where you can find and connect with others within your field:  
[www.graduatejunction.net](http://www.graduatejunction.net)

Comic strips and humour to lighten load of doing a doctorate:  
[www.phdcomics.com/comics.php](http://www.phdcomics.com/comics.php)

Matt Might's 'illustrated guide to a PhD':  
<http://matt.might.net/articles/phd-school-in-pictures>

The 'Researcher's Bible':  
<http://homepages.inf.ed.ac.uk/bundy/how-tos/resbible.html>

'How To Write A Dissertation, or Bedtime Reading For People Who Do Not Have Time To Sleep':  
[www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/dec/essay.dissertation.html](http://www.cs.purdue.edu/homes/dec/essay.dissertation.html)

'The Thesis Whisperer', blog by Inger Mewburn:  
<http://thethesiswhisperer.wordpress.com>

## Other resources

Moore, P 'Quality Papers' workbook and 'Conference Posters' workbooks

# Acknowledgements

QAA would like to thank all those who provided comments and other assistance in the preparation of *The UK Doctorate: A guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates*. Particular thanks go to:

Dr Debbie McVitty

Research and Policy Officer (Higher Education),  
National Union of Students

Thanks are also due to the members of an external advisory group:

Dr Iain Cameron

Head, Research Careers and Diversity Research  
Councils UK Strategy Unit

Ms Gill Clarke

Higher education consultant; visiting fellow at the  
Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol;  
and DPhil candidate, University of Oxford

Professor Pam Denicolo

Director of the Graduate School for the Social  
Sciences and Director of the Pharmacy Centre for  
Inter-Professional Postgraduate Education and  
Training, University of Reading

Professor Chris Park

Higher education consultant; formerly of the  
University of Lancaster; and special advisor to the  
Higher Education Academy

Professor Ingrid Lunt

Department of Education, University of Oxford

Dr Janet Metcalfe

Chair and Head, Vitae

Professor Clive Neal-Sturgess

Emeritus Professor of Mechanical Engineering,  
University of Birmingham; Visiting Professor of  
Automotive Safety, Coventry University; Visiting  
Professor of Clinical Biomechanics, Birmingham  
City University

Professor Vernon Trafford

Professor Emeritus Anglia Ruskin University

Dr Christian Yeomans

Policy Officer UK Higher Education International  
and Europe Unit

Ms Janet Bohrer

Assistant Director Research, Research,  
Development and Partnerships, QAA

Finally special thanks goes to all those individuals who responded to the consultation, contributed to workshop discussions and gave advice, including Mrs Carolyn Campbell (Head of Networks and Partnerships, QAA), Mr Derfel Owen (Multimedia and Student Engagement Manager, QAA) and Mrs Rachel Beckett (Multimedia Editor, QAA).

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2011

ISBN 978 1 84979 373 5

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786