

How to apply to PhD programs

Kasia Paprocki, Department of Geography and Environment,
London School of Economics and Political Science

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Outline

- Why get a PhD?
- Choosing a program and a supervisor
- Proposing a research project
- Some tips on the application process

What is a PhD? Why get one?

- An academic credential that can be useful in pursuing certain careers
- Some questions to ask yourself:
 - Do you want to be an academic? In Bangladesh or abroad?
 - Do you want to be a policy maker?
 - Do you want to do research? What kind? With and for whom? Could you do the research you want to do for an NGO?
- Get advice from mentors about specific credentials and skills that would be useful

Choosing a Discipline

- PhD programs train students to become disciplinary, not topical experts.
- So the discipline you choose really matters to:
 - How you ask your research questions and what methods you use
 - The kinds of other literatures you engage with in your writing
 - Where you publish and who is reading your work
 - The other topics you spend your time thinking about unrelated to your own research
 - The kinds of jobs you might be equipped for afterwards
- You can focus on climate change as the topic of your PhD research. But you can't get a PhD in climate change. You need to think more broadly than this.

Choosing a PhD program

Differences between American and British programs

- US:
 - Usually takes longer to complete (6-8 years not uncommon)
 - Often include a Masters degree at the beginning, which may be funded as part of the PhD program
 - May involve extensive coursework as well as rigorous “qualifying exams” before beginning actual PhD research
 - More time to publish during graduate program means more developed CVs by the time of degree
- UK:
 - Shorter to complete (~4 years)
 - Applicants generally expected to come in with a defined research project – expectation is that it will change, but there will be less time to develop it
 - More opportunities in the UK for postdoctoral research on existing projects

PhD Supervisors

- Who is a good supervisor?
 - Someone who is actively teaching and doing research currently
 - Someone who isn't going to leave before you're finished
 - Someone whose expertise aligns with your interests
- How to identify shared expertise?
 - Think about theoretical/methodological interests, not just empirical or geographic ones
 - Whose research are you reading and enjoying? Why?
- Write to professors early with a clearly defined project idea building on something they are already doing and clearly relate it to the potential advisor's work

Proposing a research project

A good academic research project offers a lens through which to understand broader processes.

- What are the larger debates in the academic field you're applying to that you are interested in intervening in? How do you plan to contribute to those debates?
- Make sure to consider not only an empirical topic, but also the academic sub-fields that topic allows you to engage with.

Some final tips

- Reach out to the PhD program administrator
- Reach out to current PhD students
- In your personal statement:
 - This should focus on who you are as a researcher; your own autobiography is relevant insofar as it helps the reader to understand who you are as a researcher and the kind of research you want to do.
 - Don't forget to address: why this particular program? Why this particular advisor?
- Make sure to be sensitive to how busy faculty are

Some useful tips and resources

- [“So you want to get a PhD in Anthropology?” by Saida Hodžić](#)
- [“What I Wish Someone Taught Me When I Applied to My PhD” by Noha Fikry](#)
- [Chris Blattman Twitter thread on the Statement of Purpose](#)
- [Roman Feiman Twitter thread on Statement of Purpose/Research](#)
- [Jessica Calarco, *A Field Guide to Grad School*](#)