



University of
Reading

Doctoral and
Researcher College

A PhD: **WHAT, ME?**

A comprehensive guide
to doing a PhD at Reading

CONNECTING PEOPLE: **CONNECTING MINDS**

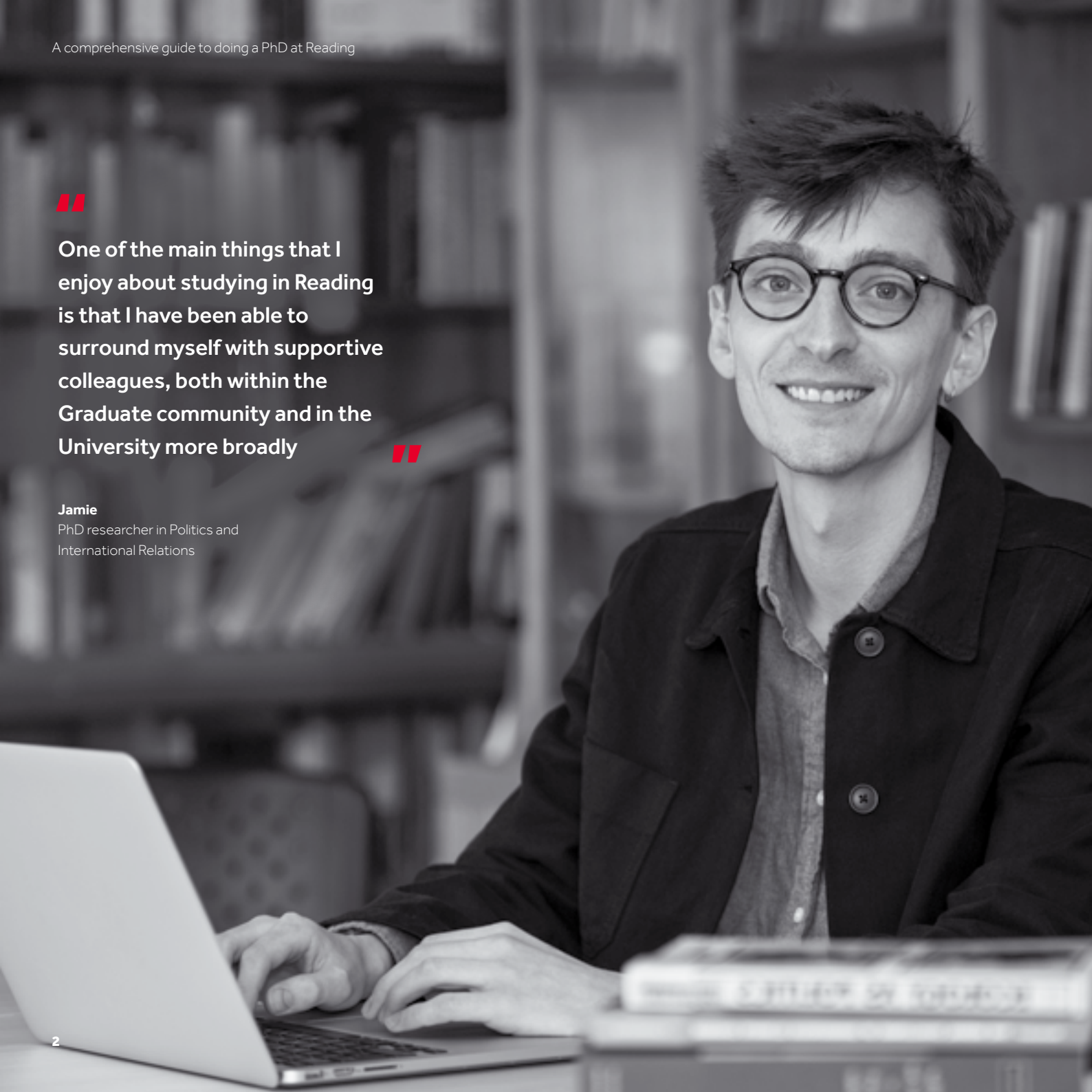
“

One of the main things that I enjoy about studying in Reading is that I have been able to surround myself with supportive colleagues, both within the Graduate community and in the University more broadly

”

Jamie

PhD researcher in Politics and International Relations



A PhD: What, me?

When you started your undergraduate programme, you probably noticed that many of the academic staff had the title 'Dr' before their names. Did you ever wonder what they had to do to earn this title? Have you ever wondered whether one day you might have the title 'Dr' before your name and, if so, what you would need to do to earn a PhD?

This brochure sets out to demystify the PhD, to help you decide if this is something you might like to study for. It starts by explaining what a PhD is, and what is involved in studying for one at Reading. It looks at what you need to get a place, in terms of qualifications and aptitude, and how you go about selecting a topic, finding a supervisor, writing a proposal and submitting an application. It tells you about the Doctoral and Researcher College and what we do to provide training and other support to doctoral researchers. It also provides information about fees and outlines the types of funding opportunities that are available. Finally, it looks at how gaining a PhD can benefit you in terms of your future employability.

DOCTORAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE



A Personal Reflection

Our doctoral students are wonderfully diverse, not only in their backgrounds, cultures and modes of study, but also in their motivations and ambitions for the future. For me, deciding to do a PhD wasn't a long-term career plan, but rather something I fell into after getting my undergraduate degree result. It was the best – or luckiest – decision of my life!

You may think that a PhD is about researching a topic in great depth; it is, but it is also so much more. The Doctor of Philosophy award has two elements. The “Doctor” can be thought of as generating new knowledge and understanding that moves your field of study forwards by, “standing on the shoulders of giants”, as Isaac Newton wrote. At the end of the project, you will be the world expert in your (albeit small) area of specialism and will disseminate and communicate this to allow others to use your findings in their own work.

The “Philosophy” part is equally important. Your PhD will fundamentally change the way that you approach a problem, how you think, how you analyse, critique and present research as an independent researcher. These are the transferable skills that greatly enhance your employability and broadens out career opportunities beyond your area of specialism. And the skills you learn will stay with you for life: despite doing my own PhD in the last Millennium,

I still catch myself passing on the same words of advice that I received to the Doctoral candidates that I currently work with.

How do you know if a PhD is right for you? From my experience, a key trait is that you have curiosity and determination to “find out new stuff!” Of course, there are academic requirements, but a PhD is about generating new knowledge and understanding, not learning taught materials and established facts. You need to be curious, determined, innovative and committed, skills that a University of Reading doctorate will help you develop.

I hope that you will consider undertaking a PhD, and this brochure is intended to outline how it works – from the funding opportunities we have through to the examination process at the end. I am committed to ensuring that our University provides the best experience we can for our doctoral researchers, so that they gain the very most from it and can go on to make a difference in whatever career they follow.

Professor Adrian Williams

Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor

(Postgraduate Research Studies and Researcher Development)



DOCTORAL AND RESEARCHER COLLEGE

The Doctoral and Researcher College is based in a beautiful Victorian building (Old Whiteknights House) on the Whiteknights Campus. It provides a range of desk space, and hosts many training, networking and social events for doctoral researchers.

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What is a PhD?

PhD is short for 'Doctor of Philosophy', and this is one type of doctoral qualification (see page 9 for others).

The same title applies whatever the subject area you are working in. Studying for a PhD involves carrying out an independent and original piece of research, which you write up in the form of a thesis (which looks rather like a large book). To qualify for the award you will 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.'

Although this may sound daunting, you will receive the appropriate training and support to enable you to do this. It may be reassuring to know that we have a proven track-record in supporting doctoral students to successfully complete their studies.¹

If you are a full-time student, you will be expected to complete the programme within four years. Part-time students have a longer registration period, for details please visit rdg.ac/phd-part-time

Unlike most undergraduate and master's programmes, a PhD does not involve any written exams and, in many Schools and Departments, no assessed coursework either. However, it does involve a lot of learning, through on the job supervision and through subject-specific and generic research and professional skills training courses (see page 19). The main thing you will learn is how to become an independent researcher – how to undertake a systematic enquiry, using sound research methods, and how to communicate the knowledge you have gained effectively to others.

The type of knowledge you will gain, and the particular methods you will learn, will vary depending on your subject area. A researcher in the sciences or life sciences, for example, may learn how to generate sensible hypotheses and test them using experimental techniques and statistical methods. In contrast, a researcher in a humanities discipline might have to learn how to identify relevant information sources and analyse and use the material to support a particular line of argument. Whatever the subject area, you will need to become familiar with how to put your work in the context of a much wider literature so that you can make your own independent contribution to this.

The form and length of PhD theses also vary depending on discipline area and topic (and writing style of the author). However, most standard theses are between 60,000 and 80,000 words in length (with the maximum permitted length normally being 90,000).

As you progress in your studies, you are likely to give presentations on your research at various meetings and conferences, and also to produce written publications (such as journal articles and book chapters) or other forms of research output. You will learn how to become a skilled communicator.

1. 99% of doctoral researchers who submit their thesis are successfully awarded a doctorate. University of Reading Doctoral Examinations Outcomes, averaged over a five-year period, 2020/21 to 2024/25. Figure rounded down from 99.06%.

How is it examined?

Once you have completed and submitted your PhD thesis, it is examined by two independent examiners.

There will normally be one from within the University (often your own School or Department) and one from another university or some other appropriate organisation. The external examiner will almost certainly be an expert in the general area of your research. The internal examiner is likely to have a broader knowledge of the area, and is present partly to ensure that the examination is conducted in line with Reading's rules and regulations.

Your examiners will read your thesis independently and then give you an oral examination, known as a viva (short for 'viva voce'). During the viva (which normally lasts around two to three hours) you will be asked a series of questions to ensure that you have a good understanding of the field in which you are working and where your particular research sits within it, as well as of the significance of the contribution you have made, and of any limitations of your work and how these could be addressed. Your examiners will also want to reassure themselves that you demonstrate authorship of the research (that is to say, show that it is your own work).

What are the other types of doctorate and how does a PhD differ from these?

Although the most common, PhDs are not the only type of doctoral research programme.

There are, for example, Professional and Practice-based Doctorates, which involve a different pattern of study and way of working. In the case of Professional Doctorates, doctoral researchers usually undertake a programme of advanced study and research which (as well as satisfying the criteria for the award of a doctorate) also meets the needs of one or more professional group, such as engineering, clinical psychology, education, or business and management. The general aim of such programmes is to find novel approaches to integrating professional and academic knowledge. Studying for a professional doctorate usually involves studying for a number of assessed taught courses (typically at the start of the programme) and completing an original piece of research presented in the form of a thesis. On many programmes, the students are often in employment and are sponsored by their employers. In the case of Practice-based Doctorates (which are most common in Art & Design or Film & Theatre disciplines), the programme requires the production of an original artefact in addition to or, in some cases, instead of a written thesis.



I enjoy the collaborative and innovative atmosphere at Reading as this is enabling me to develop my own research as well as working with others



Anika

PhD researcher
in Pharmacy



So what's an MPhil?

An MPhil is like a PhD but it is a master's level qualification.

The study period is shorter than for a PhD and the length of the thesis is also typically shorter (with the maximum permitted length being 60,000 words). To qualify for the award, the thesis is expected to make an adequate original contribution to knowledge or understanding (rather than a substantial contribution, as is the case for PhDs), or be a valuable presentation or interpretation of material put together in an original manner.



Do I have what it takes to gain a PhD?

To be accepted to study for a PhD, you will need to have an undergraduate degree of at least a 2:1 level (or equivalent) and/or a master's degree, in a subject area related to your proposed PhD topic.

In some areas of the University (particularly in the arts and humanities, social sciences and business) students are normally only accepted if they have a master's level qualification. Occasionally, students who do not have the necessary academic qualifications are accepted, where it is shown that they have gained the necessary knowledge, skills and aptitude through their professional training and experience.

If you are from outside the UK, and English is not your first language, you will also need to demonstrate that you have a certain level of proficiency with written and spoken English. The normal entry requirement for a research programme is a score of 6.5 on the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test, although some departments require a score of 7. Exceptions can be made where an applicant has recently studied for another degree, or worked, in a country where English is the native language.

Having the necessary academic qualifications and level of English language proficiency is only the first step in getting accepted on a PhD programme. In many subject areas, you will also need an outline research proposal (see page 17), and one or more members of academic staff who are knowledgeable in that area and willing to supervise you (see page 16). You will also need to have secured funding for the programme, or be able to demonstrate that you have the means to fund yourself (see page 12). Finally, the School or Department where you will be registered will want to reassure themselves that you have the right motivation and aptitude to study for a PhD (see next section).

What sort of people study for PhDs?

PhD students vary considerably in terms of age, professional and personal background, lifestyle, country of origin and mode of study.

In Reading, we have an extremely diverse community of doctoral researchers. One thing they will all have in common, however, is a genuine interest in research and a strong motivation to learn how to become an independent researcher. Completing a PhD requires determination and commitment. You should only consider applying if you have an enquiring mind, the ability and willingness to take responsibility for your own learning, and the tenacity and motivation to commit yourself to a lengthy and challenging (although thoroughly rewarding) programme of study.



What does it cost and what financial support is available?

The fee payable for your PhD will depend upon whether you are from the UK or from another country, and on your mode of attendance.

Details of the different fee options are given at: rdg.ac/phd-fees

In some academic areas, an additional Research Expenses Fee is charged for use of specialist laboratory equipment, consumables and other related facilities.

Some students (particularly those from outside the UK) come to the University with their own source of funding to cover their fees and their living costs. A good number of international students are funded, for example, by their own governments or other organisations. The University also offers a range of financial support options for doctoral researchers.

It can vary, but we typically offer around 150 studentships and bursaries each year, some funded by the central University, some by individual Schools and Departments, and some from external organisations such as UK Research Councils, charities and industrial sponsors. Most of these are available for UK students only, but we do have a number of dedicated studentships specifically for international students. A full studentship covers the costs of fees, a maintenance grant (known as a stipend) and some research expenses. Stipend levels can vary but as a guide, you can find details of the UKRI minimum stipend level at ukri.org/

There are also opportunities to earn additional money whilst studying for the PhD. Many doctoral researchers earn income from contributing to teaching in the University, or from other work that is available on campus or in the town. Clearly, it is important for you to ensure that the nature of the work and the demands on your time fit with your PhD schedule. Some Schools and Departments offer Graduate Teaching Assistant positions or teaching studentships, which require post-holders to carry out a fixed amount of teaching per session whilst studying for their PhD on a part-time basis. Where such positions are available, they will be advertised within the School/Department.

How will I benefit from studying for, and gaining, a PhD?

When studying for your PhD you will not only become an expert in your particular area of research, but you will also acquire a broad range of transferable and professional skills that will be of benefit to you whatever career path you follow.

Some of these (such as time management, project management, writing for different audiences, presentation skills, leadership, and assertiveness) are 'taught' in courses and workshops on the Reading Researcher Development Programme (see page 19). Others you will acquire simply through your experiences of working on your PhD, such as the ability to communicate effectively, work independently, think innovatively, critically analyse situations and documents, and solve problems in an analytical way. Studies have shown that employers particularly value skills such as an ability to communicate complex ideas, to collaborate and work effectively with others, to conceptualise, design and implement projects, to generate creative solutions to problems, to work

with independence and initiative, to plan and deliver long term projects, to apply cutting-edge research skills and techniques, and to reflect on one's own personal and professional development.

If you want to work as a University lecturer in the UK, you will almost certainly need to have gained a PhD (or, in a few disciplines, be undertaking one). A PhD will also be essential for most research posts.

Outside of academia, PhD students move on to a broad range of careers, often in research related positions; for example, in the health sector, broader education sector, business and finance, engineering and computing, creative industries, and government. Many end up holding very senior positions.

Deciding on a topic and appropriate Department

How do I select a research topic?

Some students apply to study for a PhD at Reading in response to an advert for a particular research project on a specific topic.

This is more likely to happen in the sciences and life sciences. In this case, there is no choice of topic to be made. However, if you are accepted to work on such a PhD project, there will still be an opportunity for you to shape the project in line with your particular interests and to gain real ownership of it and make an independent and original contribution to knowledge in the area.

Other students apply because they want to carry out research in an area of their own choosing.

You may have an interest that stems from a particular course, or project or dissertation work, that was part of your undergraduate or master's course, or from some professional experience. Alternatively, you may want to carry out research in an area that relates to a more personal interest of yours. You may, for example, have gained a degree in computer sciences but your real interests lie in the area of music. In this case, you could combine your skills and interests to think of an interesting research question in the area of music technology.



Reading offers you
the right blend and
balance of academic
and social support //

Adeyinka Adewale
PhD researcher in the Henley Business School

IDEAS FOR PhD PROJECTS

We provide a number of ideas here
rdg.ac/find-your-phd-project

Whatever your area of interest, it is important that you choose a topic that can be addressed within the appropriate timescale, with the resources likely to be available to you, and where we have academic staff with the appropriate skills and experience to supervise you. It is also the case that you do need to be genuinely interested in what you are proposing to do. If accepted, you will be working on the topic for the next three or four years or even longer if you study on a part-time basis. Having said this, you are not committed to sticking with the specific ideas you set out in your research proposal (see page 17). Many students amend projects as their ideas develop and on the basis of their reading and preliminary findings.

How do I know which School or Department would be best to support my research?

Once you have a rough idea of a suitable research topic, you will need to identify the most appropriate academic School or Department that could support your research.

This might be the same department where you studied, or are studying for, your undergraduate or master's degree, or one that has the same disciplinary name (if you are coming to Reading from elsewhere). If you are unsure which School or Department is most appropriate, then it is probably best to do a bit of searching on the University website.

School and Department web pages will set out their main areas of research and many will also outline general areas where they provide supervision. There are a number of cross-School multidisciplinary research priorities within the University which offer opportunities for prospective students wanting to work in those areas.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

A list of School and Department web pages for prospective students can be found here rdg.ac.uk/doctoral-research-areas

Visit reading.ac.uk/research for information about our five overarching research themes. If having browsed the web you are still uncertain about where your research best fits then contact the Doctoral and Researcher College for advice reading.ac.uk/question

Do I have to find my own supervisor?

Unlike your undergraduate or master's studies, your progress on your PhD will be primarily guided and supported by just one or two key members of academic staff (called supervisors).

Your main supervisor will act as a tutor, mentor, guide, critic and, sometimes, friend. If you have applied to study for a PhD in response to an advert for a specified research project, then one or more supervisors will already be attached to the project. In other cases, potential research projects have to be matched against available supervisory expertise. If you already know of a particular member of staff who you want to work with, then you might want to contact them informally before submitting an application, to see if he or she would be interested in supervising your potential research project. If you do this, you should also contact the School or Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies, as well, as they will know whether there are other members of staff who have the appropriate expertise to supervise you. You can also use the web to look at the research interests of particular members of academic staff. If you want to go into any more detail you could use Google Scholar to search for their relevant publications.

It is not essential however, for you to identify a potential supervisor before submitting a formal application. If you have not done this, your application will be sent to the most appropriate School or Department and they will identify potential supervisors. If you are offered a place here, you will be notified of the name of at least one suitably qualified member of academic staff who has agreed to supervise you.

**CONTACT A DIRECTOR OF POSTGRADUATE
RESEARCH STUDIES**

Contact a Director:
rdg.ac/pgrdirectors



Do I need to write a research proposal and how should I go about this?

There are three basic ways to apply for a PhD.

First, many Schools and Departments in Science and Life Sciences will have suggested PhD project areas advertised on their web pages, and you can express an interest in one or more of these. Second, you can contact a School or Department directly (usually by emailing the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies or a potential supervisor) to express your interest in a particular area of research that you know the School / Department has expertise in. Following discussion with relevant staff, you would normally be required to produce an outline research proposal expanding on your initial ideas. Third, you can make a direct application via the online application system (see page 21) and include an outline research proposal on a topic of interest to you. Several Schools and Departments, particularly those in the arts and humanities, business and social sciences areas, will require a research proposal so it is best to look at individual School web pages to check their specific requirements.

The content and structure of your research proposal will inevitably vary depending on your discipline area and the nature of the project you wish to pursue. You should remember, however, that this is only an outline proposal. We do not expect you to produce a fully worked out plan for your entire PhD. The main

purpose of the document is to see whether what you propose is a suitable topic for PhD study, whether such a study would be feasible with the time and resources available, and whether it is an area that would be of interest to the relevant School / Department and that we have appropriately qualified staff who could act as supervisors. The proposal can almost be thought of as a starting point for negotiation – for opening, or continuing, a conversation between you and the School/Department.

Broadly speaking, the outline proposal should describe the main research question or questions that you want to address and why it is worth addressing. It should also outline your proposed research methodology and approximate timetable for how the work would be scheduled across the normal registration period. It is also important to say what the expected outcomes of your project would be; how it will contribute to knowledge, advance theoretical understanding, or contribute to policy or practice.

Some Schools/Departments include guidelines for how to write a research proposal on their web pages for prospective PhD students. In addition, the Doctoral and Researcher College has produced a generic guide that is available on the website.

Do I have to begin my programme at the start of the academic year in October?

No, we allow prospective students to apply for, and start, their programme at any time of year in most Schools and Departments, although the majority do start in September/October (and a few Schools and some funders do require this). In order to help doctoral researchers who join the University later in the academic session, the Doctoral and Researcher College runs University-wide welcome and induction events several times a year.

DOWNLOAD RESEARCH PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

Download the Doctoral and Researcher College's guidelines:
rdg.ac/phd-how-to-apply

What else is involved?

What other support and facilities will I have access to?

We only offer places to prospective PhD students if we are confident that we can provide the appropriate support and access to facilities that will be needed to carry out the proposed research project.

What is provided will depend very much on the discipline area and the nature of the proposed project. Some projects may require dedicated use of a specific piece of equipment, whereas others might require shared access to some larger facility. Others may require access to certain participant populations or to specialist materials or archives.

In addition to specific research facilities, all full-time and some part-time students will normally have allocated desk space and access to appropriate computing facilities. For most students, this will be in their home School or Department but, where this is not feasible, the Doctoral and Researcher College offers additional desk space. Some research studentships come with a dedicated amount of funding

for research expenses, and many Schools/ Departments have funds available to support travel to relevant meetings and conferences (as does the Doctoral and Researcher College).

More generally, the University has a wide range of other services available to students including helping you with accommodation, study advice, English language support, disability support and careers advice, as well as a chaplaincy and medical service. We also have over 150 active student-run groups and over 50 sports clubs that doctoral researchers can join.

Find out more at: rdg.ac/doctoral-support

What is the Doctoral and Researcher College and what else does it do?

On joining the University, all new doctoral researchers, whether based in Reading or off-campus, automatically become members of the Doctoral and Researcher College in addition to their academic School or Department.

The Doctoral and Researcher College is the hub of all doctoral research activity across the University. Its main purpose is to champion the academic and social interests of doctoral researchers from across the University, and to provide an exciting and supportive environment. It runs the Reading Researcher Development Programme (see page 19) and organises other networking events. Through the Doctoral and Researcher College you will join a thriving multidisciplinary and multicultural community in which you can exchange ideas and broaden your horizons.

The Doctoral and Researcher College is based in a beautiful Victorian building (Old Whiteknights House) on the Whiteknights Campus. It provides desk space, and hosts many training, networking and social events for doctoral researchers.

INFORMATION ON NETWORKING EVENTS

Visit: rdg.ac/doctoral-events

What training will I need to undertake?

PhD students need to learn a broad range of skills in order to carry out their research effectively and to be successful in their ongoing career, be this in academia or elsewhere.

At Reading, PhD students benefit from engaging with a specially developed training programme (the Reading Researcher Development Programme – RRDP), which complements any subject-specific research training provided by your School or Department. The RRDP offers a rich array of training sessions and workshops covering a broad range of generic research and professional skills and personal development. Courses cover topics such as statistical research methods, writing a literature review, how to write a paper, surviving your viva, time management, managing projects, getting your first academic job, using social media to benefit your career, building confidence, and many more.

The programme is organised by, and run from, the Doctoral and Researcher College, and is based on the nationally agreed 'Researcher Development Framework'. There is no set curriculum or number of hours; the programme is sufficiently flexible to enable you to select sessions that suit your particular needs as they develop over the course of your time here. However, because we believe that all PhD students benefit from engaging in some training and development activities, you will be expected to undertake a minimum number of sessions per year. The Doctoral and Researcher College also offers a Leadership Programme, delivered in collaboration with Henley Business School and a Preparing to Teach programme.

“
Reading was the perfect balance between my research interests, my career aspirations and my personal life expectations
”

Marcello

PhD researcher in Agriculture,
Policy and Development



How does the life of a PhD student differ from that of an undergraduate or master's student?

As a doctoral researcher, your daily hours and working patterns are likely to be very different from those of undergraduate and, to some extent, master's students.

You will spend the majority of each working day carrying out your research or engaging in training and development events or other School-based activities. You may be based in a scientific lab, working alongside other students or postdoctoral researchers, or you may spend more time in libraries or working with other specialised material or archives, either here or in other locations. As you progress, you may spend more time working at a desk, either in your home School/Department or in the Doctoral and Researcher College. There will also be other events in your School / Department or the Doctoral and Researcher College that you will want to attend, such as seminars and discussion groups.

Another difference is that, although we expect you to take holidays, doctoral researchers do not 'break up' in June and return in October each year. The structure of your year will be more similar to that of academic staff than to other types of student. In line with this, we think of you (and you should think of yourselves) as professional researchers, albeit still at an early stage of your career.

We recognise that some of you may need to take part-time jobs whilst studying for your PhD, but it is important that the amount of time you spend on these should not detract from your ability to meet the needs of your research programme. You are here, first and foremost, to get your PhD.



“ Doctoral and Researcher College staff are always available to offer advice and answer queries about personal and research development ”

Emma

PhD researcher in Psychology
and Clinical Language Sciences

I think this is for me; how do I apply?

At some point in the process, you will need to submit an application via our online application service at rdg.ac/phd-how-to-apply

This allows you to complete your application information, attach electronic copies of your academic transcripts, certificates and other supporting information, and also provides a facility for an email request to be sent to your referees enabling them to send your supporting references directly to us.

We will let you know when we have received your application, and will also inform you when you should expect to hear from us again. Provided you meet our basic eligibility criteria, a copy of your application will be sent to the relevant School and Department for them to consider.

At this stage, if you have not made contact with them directly, they may contact you to discuss the research proposal or to invite you for an interview (either in person or online). It is useful to prepare for interviews in advance, thinking about some of the obvious questions that you might be asked, such as:

- Why do you want to do a PhD?
- What got you interested in this particular topic?
- How will you go about investigating this question?
- What do think will be the most challenging aspect?
- Why do you think you are suited to PhD studies?
- What do you want to do once you have gained a PhD?

If your application is successful, the Admissions Office will send you a letter offering you a place at the University and explaining any conditions that you might have to meet. These might, for example, relate to confirmation of a degree result or test of English language proficiency. Nearer to the start of your studies, you will receive additional information about registration and induction events. You will also be informed if your application is unsuccessful.

SUBMIT AN APPLICATION

Visit: rdg.ac/phd-how-to-apply

How can I find out further information?

If you want further information about the admission process, you should contact the University Admissions Office by e-mailing your enquiry to pgadmissions@reading.ac.uk

Many other questions can be answered by accessing the relevant School/Department web pages, or the Doctoral and Researcher College website at rdg.ac/pg

If you still cannot find the answer to your query then you should submit your enquiry via reading.ac.uk/question

“

With facilities around the campus, I can always find a place to have a discussion with my colleagues both formally and informally

”

Phatcharasiri

PhD researcher in the Henley Business School



A PhD: WHAT, ME?

 For more information,
please contact the Doctoral and Researcher College Office:

Doctoral and Researcher College

University of Reading
Old Whiteknights House
Reading
RG6 6DN

reading.ac.uk/question

Tel (0118) 378 5063

rdg.ac/pgr