

## Doing a PhD in the Department of Development Studies SOAS University of London

The most important thing to know is that when you apply for a PhD in the Department of Development Studies at SOAS, you are applying for a specific research project that **you** have developed, not just to the programme itself. We expect applicants to tell us what they want to do and how they will do it in their application.

This means that before you formally apply, you will need to have developed your idea into a draft proposal, have identified potential supervisors and hopefully started a discussion with them before you apply.

This guide will help you navigate the process and understand what our research degree programme looks like and whether it is an appropriate path for your interests and aspirations. But having gone through it, if you have any questions or want some further advice, please get in touch with the Development Studies Director of Doctoral Studies, Prof. Michael Jennings: [Professor Michael Jennings | SOAS](#).

If you decide you would like to apply, you should look at the ***Applying for a PhD in Development Studies*** document. There is also a **FAQ** document with common questions that are asked about our programmes. You can find the links to those next to the link for this document.

### What is a PhD in Development Studies or International Development?

A PhD is a research-based degree. The research student focuses on a particular issue or problem, answers a set of questions they have asked in relation to it, to develop a strong, evidence-backed argument. The final thesis should make a significant and original contribution to the academic literature, thinking and theory in that particular area.

So a PhD is different from undergraduate and postgraduate masters degrees that you have studied previously:

1. In UG and PGT degrees, you are expected to develop a deep understanding of the knowledge and literature in that subject area. In a PhD, you are expected to make an original contribution to that knowledge.
2. UG and PGT degrees tend to cover a wide area of foundational and specialist knowledge in the area of that subject. A PhD is a very narrow focus.
3. In UG and PGT degrees you generally study within a curriculum set by the department. In a research degree, it is you who have set out the parameters of your enquiry.
4. You are working independently: although you will be supported by your supervisors and the research training you will be provided with, this is *your* work and research

### **Who is a PhD in Development Studies or International Development for?**

A PhD is mostly relevant for people who want to work in a professional research-intensive environment. It is seen by many as an essential requirement and apprenticeship for those wanting to work as an academic in a university, but can also be useful preparation for research-focused roles in a wide range of other professions and sectors.

A PhD may be right for you if:

- You have a strong passion for and interest in a particular issue and want to explore it in considerable depth.
- You want to work in a role (including as a university academic) in which deep-knowledge in a particular area, and high-level skills in designing and undertaking research are important.
- You are comfortable working independently and to be focused on this single issue for three years (six part-time).

### **What is involved in doing a PhD in Development Studies or International Development?**

The PhD process is built around the writing of an 80-100,00 word thesis, based on primary and original research that has been undertaken during the period of study. You are supported in this through a combination of one-on-one support from the supervisory team and high-level research and skills training. The structure of the programme is designed to support that:

- Your first year\* focuses on refining and finalising your research project: reading extensively and deeply around the subject area, developing the theoretical framework and designing the research methodology. To support you in this, in addition to the regular supervisory tutorials, you will undertake high-level training in research methods and approaches; and you may also take thematic taught modules relevant to your research if appropriate.
- In your second year, you will begin your primary research, which for most of our students will involve fieldwork. You will continue to regularly meet with your supervisor, mostly through online meetings if you are on overseas fieldwork.
- The third year begins the writing-up process, working on the 80-100,000 thesis which will be the culmination of your research degree. Usually you will work on individual chapters, and then meet to discuss with your supervisor the ideas and arguments before making suggested revisions.
- Some students will finish and submit the final draft of their thesis, ready for their viva examination, by the end of the third year. But many require more time to finish,

---

\* For part-time study, each year of full-time study equates to 2 years part-time: so the 'first year' for a part-time student is years 1 and 2; fieldwork 3-4; and writing-up 5-6.

and move into the final 'writing-up' 4<sup>th</sup> year. The thesis must be completed and submitted by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> year.

- Following submission, you will have a 'viva' (i.e. oral) examination in which two examiners who have read your thesis will ask questions and have a discussion about your research.

### **What is a research proposal?**

This is one of the most important parts of your application, and is a considerable factor in our decision. The proposal tells us not only whether you have a good idea for a project, but if you are ready for research at this level, and if you have sufficient understanding of the existing knowledge, debates and theories in the area of your proposed research. The proposal also allows us to see if the proposed research is a good fit for the department and supervisor. So it is important to get this as strong as you can before you submit your application.

A good research proposal is doing three things:

1. It is a comprehensive overview of the research area (the existing knowledge in it, and your contribution to it).
2. It shows you have the necessary skills in independent critical thinking and analysis for study at this level.
3. It shows you have the necessary communication skills to be able to explain your ideas, argument and approach clearly.

But how can you write an effective proposal *before* you have done the PhD itself? It is important to remember we are not expecting the proposal to be perfect or even the final version that will remain unchanged throughout the three (or six) years of research. But you do need to be able to show that you have a good understanding of the issue or topic, and a specific focus for your research as well as a plan for how you will undertake it (even if some of this may change as you deepen your knowledge and expertise).

You may find it useful when preparing your proposal to ask yourself these questions:

- What does the existing literature on this subject say? Who is arguing what?
- What is the broader theory that emerges from the literature in this area?
- What are the main research questions I am asking about this subject that will contribute new knowledge to the literature?
- What kind of evidence do I need to get, and where can it be found?

You may also find this guide ([Guideline for writing your research proposal.pdf \(soas.ac.uk\)](https://soas.ac.uk/guideline-for-writing-your-research-proposal.pdf)) useful to help you structure and write your proposal.

We would strongly recommend that before you formally submit your application, you have a look at the members of the department to see who might be a good potential supervisor (i.e. someone who works in an area related to this topic) and start a

conversation with them around your draft proposal (see the separate document for more advice on the application process).

### **What is the role of the supervisors?**

Although the PhD is independent research, and this is your project, you receive a lot of support from us: from departmental and college research seminars and training; from the SOAS Doctoral School; from your peers; and most importantly from your supervisory team.

Your supervisors will be experts in the subject of your research, and/or in its geographic region or the particular methodology you are using (if we do not have an expert in that area, we will not be able to make an offer for a place on the PhD programme).

All PhD students have a main (first) supervisor with whom they will establish a close research relationship; and a second supervisor who will provide additional support. Your supervisor's role is to guide you through the process from start to finish; to ensure that you meet the relevant milestones in the PhD journey; and to evaluate and discuss your work as it develops.

The role of the supervisor will change over the course of the programme:

- In the first year (Y1 and 2, part-time), they will be offering advice on the literature in your research area; helping refine the research questions, focus and argument; and helping you develop your methodology and what you will do in your fieldwork year.
- In the second year (Y3 and 4, part-time), the focus switches to supporting the fieldwork research process, with continued regular feedback on issues arising and on the research questions and focus as they are shaped by the data you collect.
- In the final writing up year(s), supervisors provide feedback on written chapters and on preparing the final draft of the thesis; support for the viva examination (including choosing examiners and setting up the viva); and advice and support on publications, conference presentations, etc.

Across your time with us, you will have regular supervisory meetings (tutorials) to discuss your work and its progress. And supervisors will also help you identify and get training in specific skills that are relevant to your research at that stage.

There is also lots of pastoral support for all issues you may face whilst studying for a research degree across SOAS more widely.

We hope this helps you understand more clearly what doing a PhD with us looks like.

Prof. Michael Jennings.