

Applying for a PhD in the Development Studies

We have prepared this guide to give a bit more information about the application process which you may find helpful.

Please follow the links on our programme website to formally apply for a PhD, including your proposal, personal statement, the completed application form, transcripts from previous degrees and references. Applications will only be forwarded to the department when they are complete (including references), so please try to ensure you have a complete application when you apply.

However, we would strongly advise you to speak to potential supervisors **before** you formally apply, and work with them on revising and strengthening your idea for research. When reaching out to potential supervisors, it always helps to be able to send them a draft outline of your research (the proposal) as well as a CV. We need this to be able to see if this is a research project that we are able to supervise.

What is it we are looking for in applicants to our programme?

We are looking for three main things in the application:

- *The quality of the research proposal:* is the research significant, original, feasible, and with the potential to make a significant contribution to the existing academic knowledge in the area.
- *Evidence of the critical analysis and research skills necessary for study at this level:* we look for evidence of this in your research proposal, in evidence of prior research skills training in postgraduate study, and in the references, at least one of which should speak directly to the skills you possess for PhD research.
- *Evidence of a good existing level of knowledge about the subject of the research proposal:* generally found in the research proposal, supplemented by the transcript of postgraduate study, professional experience and the personal statement.

What is a research proposal and what should it look like?

The research proposal is an outline of what you intend to explore in your PhD research, and how you will go about undertaking the research. It is one of the most important parts of your application, and will be a considerable factor in the decision to make an offer. For the selectors, it gives a guide as to whether you are ready for research at this level, and whether you have sufficient understanding of the existing knowledge, debates and theories in the area of your proposed research. The proposal also allows both you and the selectors to see if the proposed research is a good fit for the department and supervisor. So it is important to get this as good as you can before you submit your application. This

is why we strongly recommend making informal contact with potential supervisors to discuss your research **before** you formally apply.

A good research proposal does three things:

1. It is a comprehensive overview of the research area (the existing knowledge in it, and what you will specifically be doing in and adding 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.

So a good proposal should give an outline of your interest and approach to the issue you have identified; show that you have a good level of knowledge about the subject and the academic literature in that area; and you have some ideas of where your research will fit into that literature. It will show you understand what kind of data will be necessary to be able to answer your research questions, and how you may go about getting that data. It should show why this research is important.

When writing it, 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 find this guide ([Guideline for writing your research proposal .pdf \(soas.ac.uk\)](#)) useful to help you structure and write your proposal.

Who should I pick as my referees?

Because we need to assess whether an applicant has the required level and set of skills in research thinking, design and undertaking, we require a referee who can speak to this. In most cases this will be someone from your postgraduate taught degree (dissertation supervisors are a good choice). The second reference may be from an employer, or someone else who can speak to your commitment and hard-work, and ability to work independently. If you have been away from a university setting for a long time and it is not possible to get an academic reference (though we would encourage all to try), you should pick someone who can still speak to your research skills and ideally someone familiar with your written work in some form.

When is the latest I can apply for the PhD programme?

The final deadlines for applying to our PhD programme will be on the website. However, each of us can only accept a limited number of PhD students each year, so the earlier you apply the more chance you have of an offer. We would recommend applying by March /

April to have a stronger chance of their being offered a place to start in the next academic session. If you are intending to apply for a scholarship, you will usually need to have applied and secured an offer by a deadline, so do take note of that when planning your application.

Do I need to do a masters degree before a PhD?

PhD students are expected to have a strong foundation of knowledge and research skills in global development or humanitarianism, often through a masters degree in a relevant subject. However, some may have developed this expertise and knowledge through professional work in a related area, and we can take this into account. If you have a masters in a different discipline, we may require you to take a masters in one of our global development programmes before admitting you to the PhD programme. Some scholarships offer funding for a masters followed by PhD programme (often known as 1+3 funding). If you do not have a relevant masters degree, it will be important for you to demonstrate in your application that you have the required foundation in knowledge and research.

How can I get funding for a PhD?

Scholarships are highly competitive and even the strongest applicants can fail to secure a scholarship. You should apply for as many scholarships as you can to maximise your chances. On the SOAS website you can find details of available scholarships (both internal and external), including deadlines and the application process. This is regularly updated to reflect existing opportunities. You should make sure you look at this as you apply, and do check back regularly.

Some scholarship applications require collaboration with your prospective supervisor in filling out (especially the ESRC UBEL and the AHRC CHASE scholarships). Please make sure you leave plenty of time for your prospective supervisor to be able to fill in any details they need to, or have discussions about the application. This should be at the very least 3 weeks notice if they are to be able to find the time alongside their other work.

Please also see the FAQ document, which hopefully addresses any additional questions you may have.