

Applying for a PhD in the Development Studies FAQs

How do I come up with an idea for my PhD research topic?

It is important that you devise your own research topic. But some can struggle with how to develop an idea into a proposal. If you are not sure what you want to focus on, think about what issues have sparked off an interest in your masters degree, or whilst working professionally. Remember you will be focusing on this for three years (or six, part-time) so it needs to be something you are passionately-interested in. Once you have an idea, start to read around the subject: what has been written about it; what might you use as a focus for your research (a case study, the issue in a particular country, etc); and how might you say something new and original within that area.

Please don't write to potential supervisors and ask their advice for what you should do. One of the things we are looking for in a proposal is evidence of ability to frame and develop a research idea. So if you are asking us what to do, that is usually taken as an indication that you are not ready for study at this level.

Can I build on my masters dissertation in developing my PhD proposal?

Some students frame their masters dissertation topic around an idea they wish to pursue in doctoral research. This can be especially useful in getting a good in-depth understanding of the relevant literature and theory, as well as experience in research in this area. However, the PhD proposal and thesis must be a development from the dissertation and new research, not just an extended version of it. You cannot use the dissertation as part of the thesis, or use the same data (although you could cite the dissertation as you would any other literature).

What is meant by an 'original' research topic? Does it have to be an issue that no-one has ever looked at before?

This is one of the biggest areas of confusion for applicants: how can they say or research something that has never been done before? When we use the word 'original', we **do not** mean that the argument must be entirely new, or that this issue has never been researched (which would be an impossible task).

Examples of what **does** makes research original may be:

- When you have created new data and evidence (e.g. through fieldwork research that no-one has done before, through engaging with groups or individuals others have not done research with before, or a case-study that has not been looked at in relation to this issue).
- When you have used a new methodological approach to using existing data sets, or asked different questions of them than previous users.

- When you provide additional (new) support for existing theories, arguments and approaches.
- When you critique existing theories, arguments and approaches and offer a new interpretation.

This is why it is important to have read the wider academic literature in your area before writing your proposal, so you know whether and how you are contributing to the literature.

If you speak to prospective supervisors before submitting the final application, they will also be able to help you identify what your research is doing that is 'new' and give you suggestions and advice to ensure it meets the criteria for originality.

What is the literature review supposed to be about in the proposal?

The literature review is where you not only summarise the main areas of thinking, debate and theory in your area of research, but critically engage with it in order to show where you will make your original contribution. Whilst we don't expect you to have read everything in the area (after all, this is one of the tasks of the PhD process itself!), we are looking for a good level of understanding of the main literature, theories and debates in this area.

How can I prepare a methodology before I've started working on the project?

A good question! We are not looking for the final fieldwork methodology in this section, but evidence that you understand data, approaches to gathering that data and how it will be analysed and used to support your thesis' argument. For example, having set out your main research question, have you thought about what kinds of evidence you need to answer that question? Who has that information and how will you get access to it? Are there particular groups, individuals or institutions where that information is likely to be found? What might be an appropriate methodology, and how can you be sure the evidence is rigorous? This is one of the key areas where we can see evidence of your existing research skills which is so important for our decision on whether to make an offer.

How do I identify a potential supervisor?

Your supervisor is probably the most important relationship and support for undertaking a PhD. In many ways, the choice of supervisor is as important, and probably more so, than the department and institution. The supervisor needs to be an expert in the area of your research (whether the topic, the region, the methodological approach, or some of all of these). So look through our research profiles on the department website. If you cannot find anyone who has an interest and expertise in your research area, it may be we are not the right institution for your project.

Should I approach potential supervisors before applying?

Yes. If there is strong alignment between our proposal and their research, anyone you contact will probably reply with advice and be able to give an indication of whether they would be able to supervise your project if you applied. Before you contact anyone, have a look at their profile on our department website and look for synergies between your proposal and their research. Many of us also indicate what kinds of research we are able to supervise. If you do not get a reply, you should not assume that you will not be offered a place, and you can still apply and mention their name.

If I name a potential supervisor, will they be appointed my supervisor if I am accepted?

Naming a potential supervisor on the application form means that they will be sent the application in the first instance once it comes to the department. However, if they cannot supervise the project, the application form will be sent to others who may say yes. So we cannot guarantee that naming a potential supervisor will mean they are the ones named as first supervisor if an offer is made.

I've approached a potential supervisor, but they say they cannot supervise this project. Why?

Usually, this is because they do not feel that they have the required expertise to be able to offer sufficient support and guidance for your project. In some cases it may be that they do not have capacity to take on any new PhD students at that time. Sometimes it is because we do not feel that a research project is a good fit for the department, and may offer advice on other departments or institutions where the research will fit better.

Why wasn't I made an offer?

You should be given a reason why your application was not accepted. But there are five main reasons why you may not have received an offer:

1. You did not meet our minimum criteria for PhD-level study
2. Your application is missing key documents (e.g. references, transcripts)
3. It might have been felt that you didn't have a sufficient background in global development (either from previous degrees or professional experience) to jump straight into a PhD.
4. Those looking at the application may have felt that the proposal still needed work before it could be a viable PhD project.
5. The most common reason is that there is not someone who is able to supervise your project. Many applicants who will make great PhD students don't get an offer simply because we can't support their project within the department, so a rejection is not an indication that you cannot do a PhD.

Can I study part-time?

Yes, we have a part-time PhD study programme. See details on the programme website for the structure, but essentially each year of full-time study translates to two-years part-time. So for part-time students, they would undergo their upgrade process at the end of their second year; their fieldwork period would be in years 3 and 4; and writing up in the final two years.

However, part-time students are generally expected to undertake their departmental research training in the first year. The module runs in terms 1 and 2 with a weekly 2 hour seminar.