

RePOWER



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Applying for postgraduate study

GAIL PRESTON
CO-DIRECTOR MPLS DOCTORAL
TRAINING CENTRE

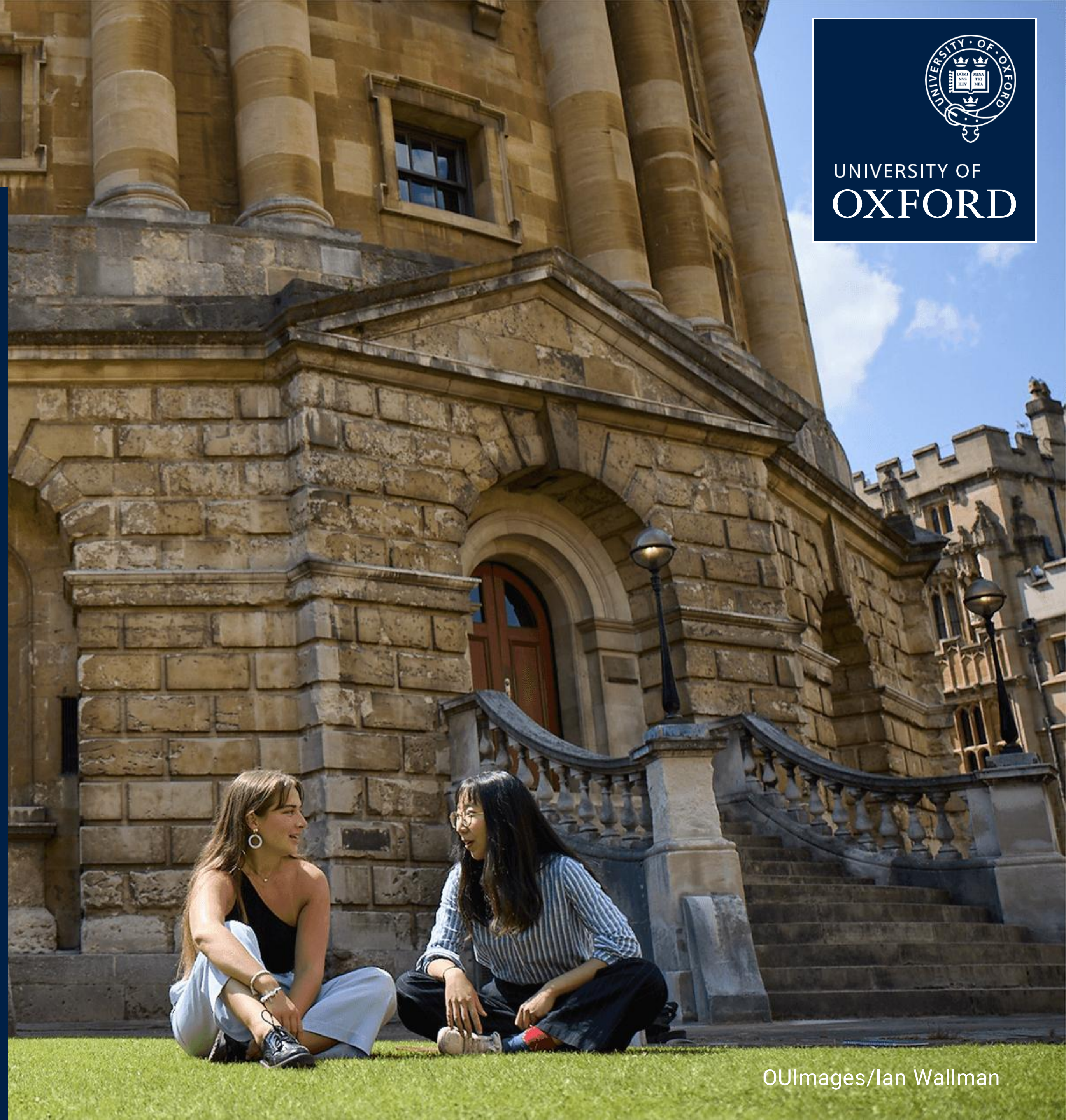


Figure out what excites you

- What are you good at? ...
- What do you read about? ...
- Team-based or individual? ...
- Computer, laboratory or field? ...
- What motivates you? ...
- What are your values? ...
- What are your career goals? ...
- Ask questions, take notes ...
- Be brave ...
- Experiment ...
- Narrow things down ...



TIMELINE – 2027 entry

1. NOW:

Explore courses, supervisors and funding

Check the costs and funding options

Check the deadline
- new funded PhDs are advertised year round

2. Start the application

Check supporting documents required

Check application fee – *and whether a fee waiver is available*

Contact your referees

3. Submit by the deadline

Submit your application as early as possible

Keep in contact with your referees

4. After you apply

Shortlisting

Interviews

Offer decisions

Scholarship decisions (Jan-May)

Late applications for UK Masters programmes and some funded doctoral studentships – April-August

A PhD or a Masters degree?

A Masters degree is not usually required for sciences doctoral study in the UK

However, a Masters degree might be right for you if:

- You want to study a subject more deeply than at undergraduate level, or to study topics not covered in your undergraduate courses
- You want to gain or demonstrate additional knowledge, skills or research experience or gain experience of working in a new country/environment
- You want to enter a career where a Masters degree is a valued or necessary qualification
- Some universities offer dual Masters/PhD programmes – these typically involve assessed taught courses in the first 1-2 years and then an additional 2-3 or more years of research

Researching institutions, research groups & programmes

Explore via:

Online resources

Recommendations – from academics/employers/students

Academic literature, conferences

Destination statistics

- What do postgraduates do?

Open days

FindAPhD.com

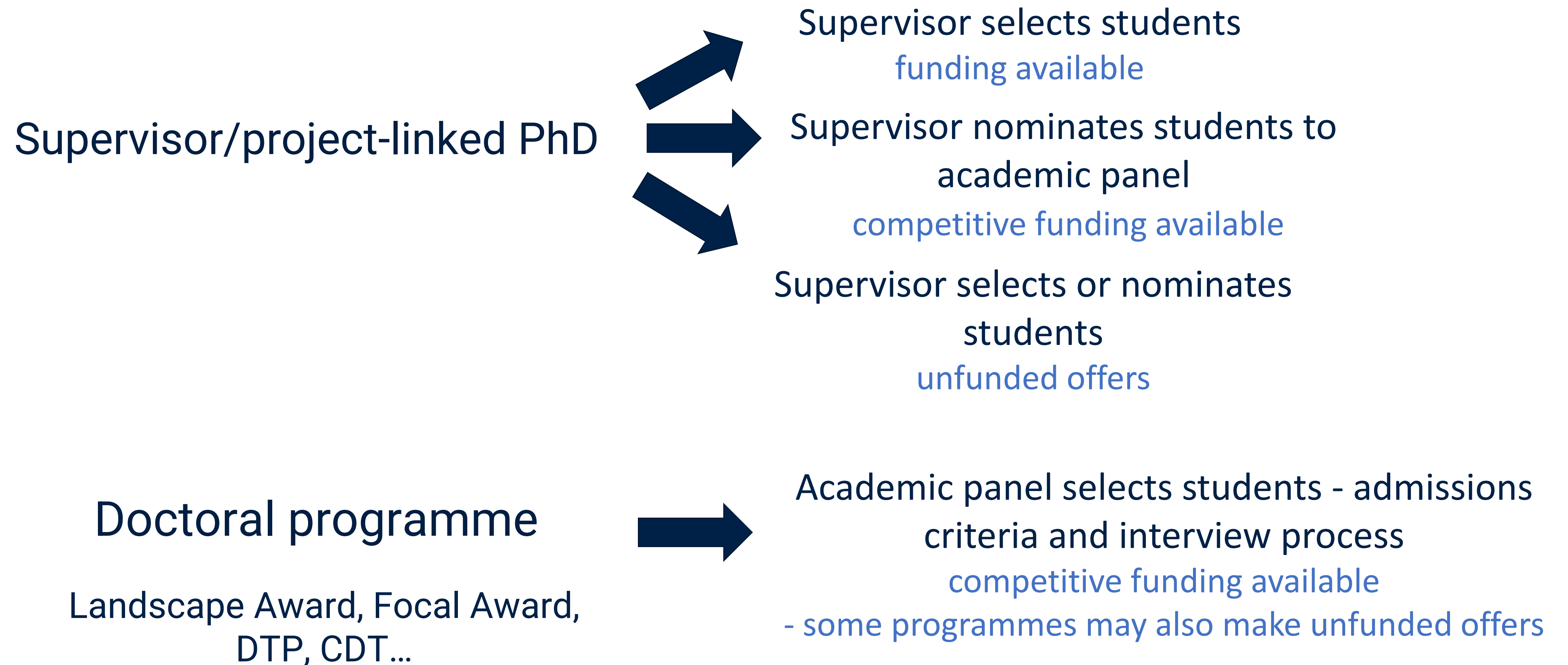
FindAMasters.com

jobs.ac.uk

Investigate:

- Publications/Recommended reading
- Encouragement to publish work and attend conferences
- Finishing rates and times in that department/with that supervisor
- Research group/department culture
- Teaching/outreach/entrepreneurship opportunities
- Networks and collaborations with other research groups
- Is there a skills training component?
- Interactions with industry/non-academic organisations
- What is like to live there
- Availability of language/other training
- Funding

Routes to Doctoral Study



Finding a supervisor

Whether you need to secure a supervisor before applying varies by course and institution.

- Search online for your area of research and look at **potential supervisor profile pages** on departmental websites
- Confirm that their research is in **your area of interest**; consider reading their publications; look at their social media profiles
- **Email group leaders and potential supervisors** to get more information and/or express interest (be concise and direct, attach your CV and your draft proposal if you have one)
- Send a **polite follow-up** if needed; don't contact more than one or two people at each institution at the same time; ask for further leads if appropriate

Read 'How to find a research supervisor'

www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/application-guide/starting-your-application/research-project-and-supervisor

Applying for a DPhil/PhD with a specific supervisor: *making contact*

- Read your potential supervisor's publications and website
- Contact your potential supervisor
 - Contact is generally initiated via a polite, well-written e-mail.
 - **Always** attach your CV **and** explain your interest in their research – **be specific.**

If there is a follow-up meeting

- Be well-prepared to discuss their research and your interests – ask questions!
- Interview “them”
- Ask to speak with current or former students from their group
- Discuss funding – if you already have ideas about how to fund your studies, and you are not applying for a funded position, mention this in your initial e-mail

Applying for a DPhil/PhD with a specific supervisor: *making contact (what not to do)*

Dear Prof. Preston,

I am a student at the University of Narnia. After glancing at your research summary I find you are interested in cerebellar diseases. I am working on <an unrelated topic>. I would like to continue to work on <unrelated topic> in your research group.

I am really interested to know if you would have any available PhD positions for September 2026. I have attached my CV for your consideration, but I also welcome any opportunity to discuss the possibilities with you by telephone or online in this regard.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Applying for a DPhil/PhD with a specific supervisor: *making contact (what to do)*

Dear Prof. Preston,

I am a student studying for an MSc in Frost Science at the University of Narnia. I have been following your work closely and I was particularly interested in your work on <specific research question/area> and intrigued by your observation that.... I am particularly interested in <areas of interest that align with the supervisor's work>.

I am currently working on/have worked on xxxx. This has enabled me to develop skills in... My research experience includes...

I am keen to know if you have any PhD positions available for September 2026. I am particularly interested in <specific research questions/topic>, but I am also interested to know if there are other projects available. I have attached my CV for your consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss any possible projects at your convenience.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Applying for a DPhil/PhD with a specific supervisor: *making contact (what to do)*

Dear Prof. Preston,

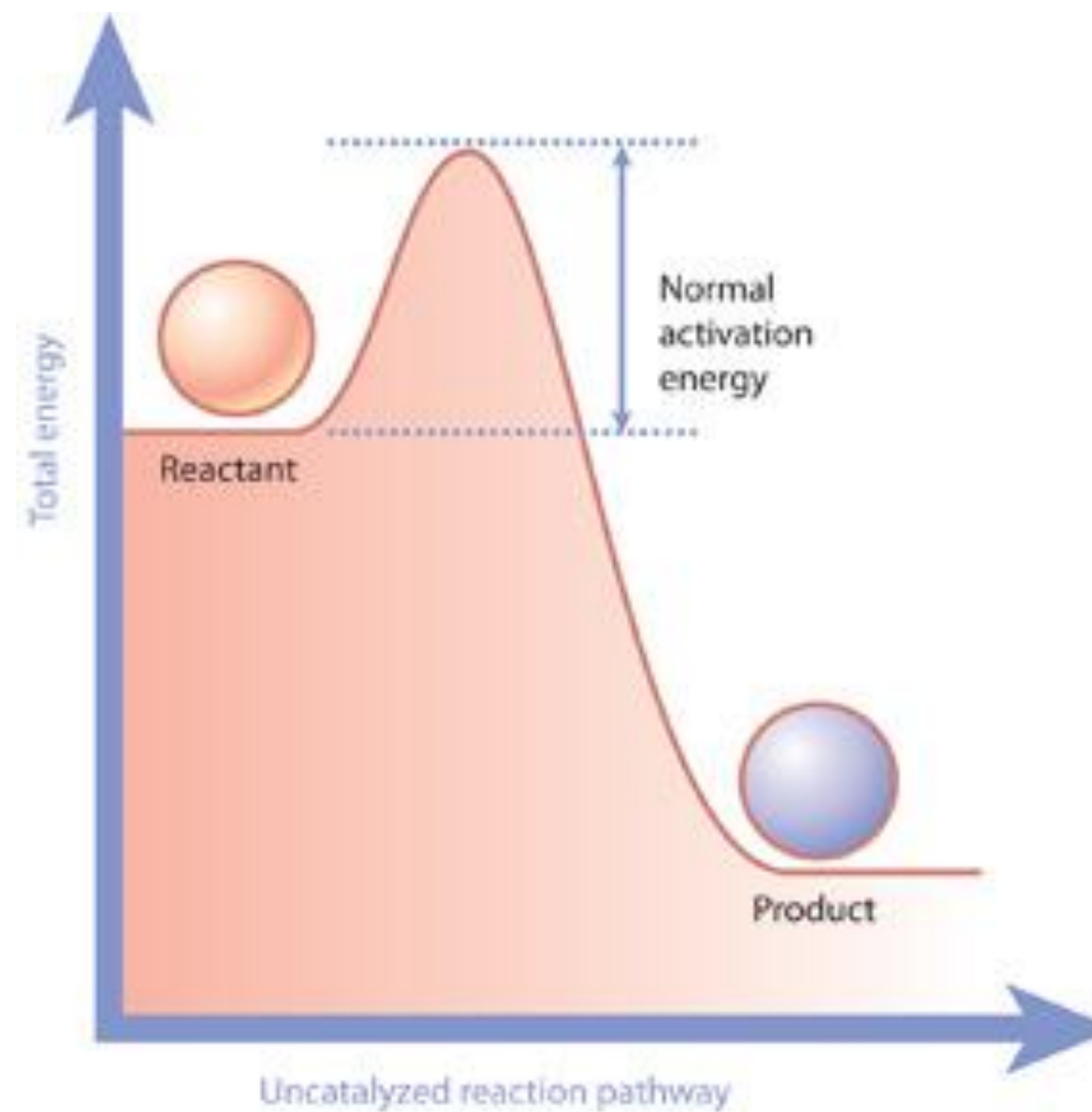
I am a research scientist working for <life science company>, who previously completed an MSc in Frost Science at the University of Narnia. I am writing to express my strong interest in applying for a PhD under your supervision. I have been following your work closely and I was particularly interested in your work on <specific research question/area> and intrigued by your observation that.... I am particularly interested in <areas of interest that align with the supervisor's work>.

My research experience includes <previous work>. My current role has enabled me to develop skills in <relevant skills for doctoral study>. In the past year I have done <actions to prepare for doctoral study>. I am now committed to returning to doctoral study <reasons why you want to do a PhD>.

I am keen to know if you have any PhD positions available for September 2027. Although I am particularly interested in <specific research questions/topic>, I am also interested to know if there are other projects available. I have attached my CV for your consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss any possible projects at your convenience.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time and consideration.

Kind regards,



Most pre-application enquiries fail to overcome the “activation energy” needed to get a supervisor reply

- No specific, well-informed interest in or knowledge of the supervisor’s work demonstrated in the initial letter
- Inadequate written English in the letter or CV
- No CV provided
- Apparent poor fit between the candidate’s background and experience and the supervisor’s research interests

Additional supervisor concerns

I don't know whether the applicant will have sufficient skills or background knowledge to work in my research area

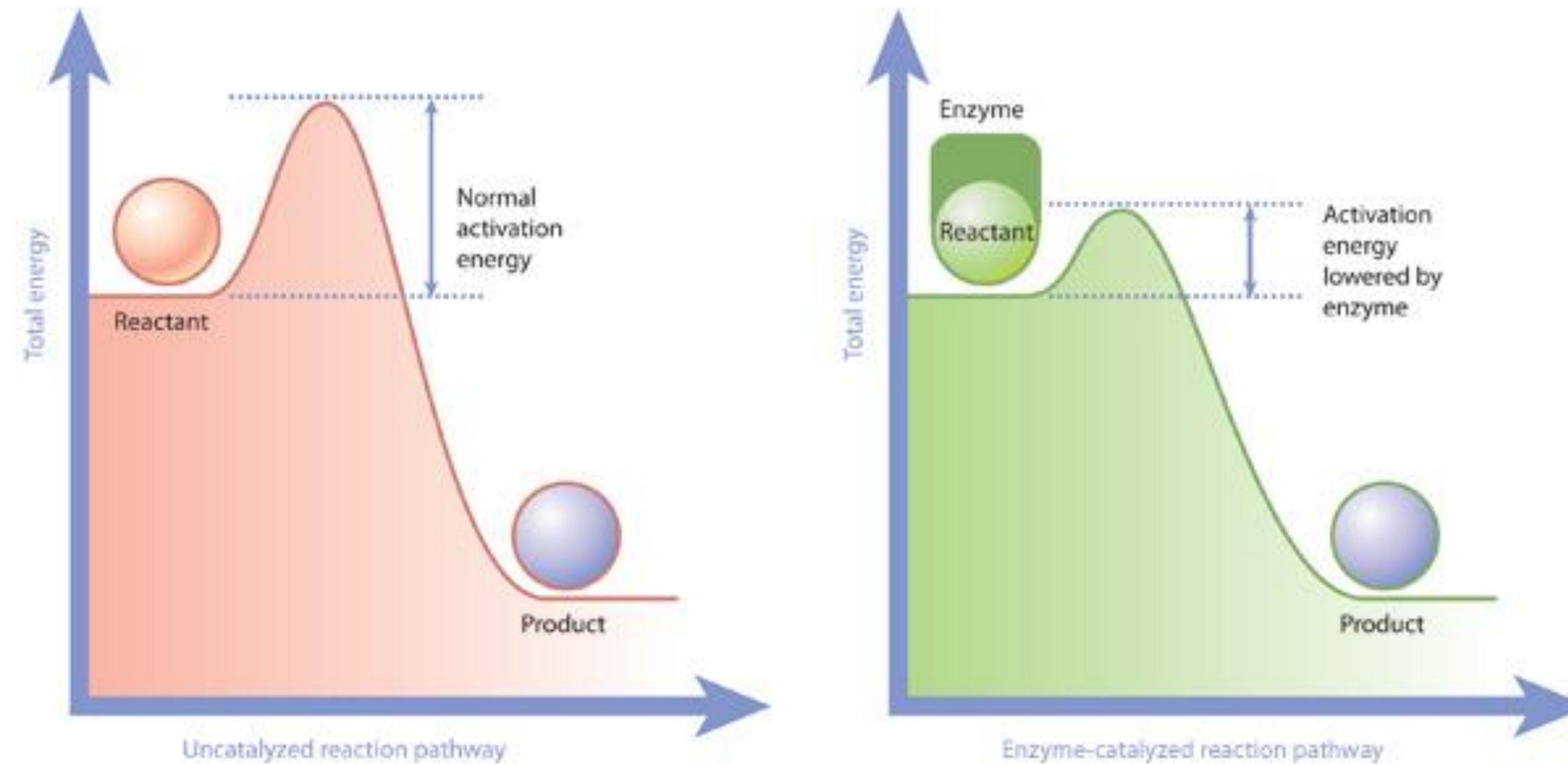
- Include your skills in your CV - and where relevant - cover letter
- If you lack relevant skills or expertise don't be deterred from applying - explain what skills you hope to develop in the future and how you plan to develop them, or how your existing skills and experience demonstrate your capacity to develop new skills.
- Develop and demonstrate your background knowledge in your enquiry letter, correspondence and meetings

A lot of our work is team-based, can the applicant work well in a team?

- Provide evidence of your team skills

I don't have sufficient funding, supervision time, space or a suitable mentor in the laboratory to support them

- Request feedback on your application
- Ask for suggestions about other potential supervisors



Catalysts!

- Mentoring
- Research experience
- Internships
- Advocates
- Networks
- Awards/Prizes
- Funding
- Synergy
- Supervisor experience
- Diligence

Questions to ask supervisors

1. How many years does a PhD normally last under your supervision? (particularly for overseas groups – in the UK, it is usually 3 to 4 years)
2. What type of guidance will I receive at the beginning and throughout the project?
3. What is your approach to supervision?
4. How flexible is this project?
5. What funding is available? (Both for stipend/fees and research costs)
6. Will I be part of a year group or cohort for which specific support and training is provided?
7. What training in research skills is available?
8. Will I have the opportunity to teach, to undertake outreach, to develop entrepreneurial skills?
9. Will I have the opportunity to attend conferences?
10. Can I meet a member of your group?
11. Can I work remotely/part-time (if relevant to your personal circumstances)
12. Specific questions about the project to learn more and show you have thought and read about it

Personal statement

- The **'how to apply' section** on your course page will tell you whether you need a research proposal, personal statement, or both
- It also contains **course-specific guidance** on things like length, structure and content
- Your **personal statement** is your opportunity to **tell your story** to the academic department based on the facts in your transcript and other supporting documents
- Think about the following questions:

→ What makes you stand out as an excellent candidate?

→ Why are you interested in your department/programme?

→ What do you hope to use your experience and qualifications for after you finish your course?



Research proposal

- Your **research proposal** is your chance to show the department why your idea is important to your subject area
- It aims to show your department why you are the best person to research your idea / topic
- It should also generally include elements such as a research question, a brief literature review and the approaches you expect to use
- Think about the following questions:
 - How does your proposed research build on existing research as well as your skills and expertise?
 - Is your project achievable in the time available for your course?
 - How do your department and proposed supervisor align with your research interests?



Applying to a Structured Doctoral Programme

- Competitive entry
- May admit students to undertake a specific project or students may be admitted to the programme with the opportunity to identify a research topic during the first year
- Admissions decisions made by a panel of academics
- Emphasis on selection criteria, fit to remit and research potential
- Need to provide a well-researched statement of research interests that shows an understanding of the remit of the programme, training provided by the programme and the expertise and interests of potential supervisors in the institution(s) involved
- Some funding may be available for overseas students – **check before applying**



UNIVERSITY OF
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Applying for graduate study – the process





Our website

www.graduate.ox.ac.uk has information on:

- Courses, including entry requirements
- Fees and funding
- Colleges
- How to apply

You can filter Oxford's full course list by length, master's/research and academic department:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/courses/find-your-course>

The screenshot shows the University of Oxford Graduate website. At the top, there is a dark blue header with the University of Oxford logo and name. Below the header, the word "GRADUATE" is displayed in white. A large, scenic photograph of a building at dusk is featured. Below the photo, a breadcrumb trail reads: Home > Admissions > Graduate > Courses > A-Z of courses. The main heading is "A-Z of courses". Below this, a text block says: "Use this A-Z and search tool to explore all of Oxford's graduate courses." At the bottom, there are three filter dropdown menus: "Full/Part time" with "- Any -", "Taught/Research" with "- Any -", and "Course level" with "- Any -".



Entry requirements

A strong upper second class (2:1) or first class (1st) undergraduate degree with honours, depending on course

For international qualifications, see www.graduate.ox.ac.uk/iq

Your undergraduate degree may need to be in a relevant discipline or have included specific skills (e.g. quantitative preparation for Economics)

Proof of **English language proficiency** in one of IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge English or Oxford Test of English Advanced (not needed at point of application) at 'Standard' or 'Higher' levels of minimum scores



Phil Brooks



Application deadlines

- At Oxford almost all courses have a deadline in early December, early January or late January – but only one of these deadlines
- Other universities may use fixed or rolling deadlines
- Check the deadline for your course **as early as possible** – different courses use different deadline dates
- At Oxford, deadline dates for 2026-27 entry are confirmed in September

- To be considered for Oxford scholarships, you'll need to apply by the December or January deadline.
- Programme/project-specific studentships may be available later in the admissions cycle





How to apply

- Review the chosen course information page carefully
- Look at the **‘How to apply’ section** for what you need to do and for the **link to the application form**
- Check what documents you need
- Check if you need to contact a supervisor before applying

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Home > Admissions > Graduate > Courses > DPhil in Biology

DPhil in Biology

LAST UPDATED 25 FEB 2025

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HOW TO APPLY

Before you apply

Our [guide to getting started](#) provides general advice on how to prepare for and start your application. You can use our interactive tool to help you [evaluate whether your application is likely to be competitive](#).

If it is important for you to have your application considered under a particular deadline – eg under the January deadline in order to be considered for Oxford scholarships – **we recommend that you aim to complete and submit your application at least two weeks in advance**. Check the deadlines on this page and the [information about deadlines and when to apply](#) in our Application Guide.

- Application fee waivers
- Do I need to contact anyone before I apply?

Completing your application

You should refer to the information below when completing the application form, **paying attention to the specific requirements for the supporting documents**.

For this course, the application form will include questions that collect information that would usually be included in a CV/résumé. You should not upload a separate document. If a separate CV/résumé is uploaded, **it will be removed from your application**.

If any document does not meet the specification, including the stipulated word count, your application may be considered incomplete and not assessed by the academic department. Expand each section to show further details.

ADMISSION STATUS

Open - applications are still being accepted

Up to a week's notice of closure will be provided on this page - no other notification will be given

DEADLINES 12:00 midday UK time on:

WEDNESDAY 8 JANUARY 2025
Latest deadline for most Oxford scholarships

TUESDAY 4 MARCH 2025
Applications may remain open after this deadline if places are still available - *see below*

A LATER DEADLINE UNDER 'ADMISSION STATUS'
If places are still available, *applications may be accepted after 4 March*. The *Admission status* (above) will provide notice of any later deadline.

KEY FACTS	Full Time Only
Course code	RD_BG1
Expected length	3 to 4 years
Places in 2025-26	c. 49
Applications/year*	190
Expected start	5 October 2025
English language	Higher level required

*Three-year average (applications for entry in 2022-23 to 2024-25)



Supporting documents

- Supporting documents at Oxford include:
 - **Personal statement** and/or **research proposal** (depending on the course)
 - **Official transcript(s)**
 - **Three references**, submitted directly by referees
- Some courses require written work, an admissions exercise or other documents
- **Standardised CV** for most courses



→ Our detailed Application Guide covers requirements for each of these standard documents:
www.graduate.ox.ac.uk/applicationguide

Contextual information

1. All institutions collect diversity data as part of monitoring and reporting processes – this is not normally available to assessors
2. Some institutions and programmes, including Oxford, collect additional contextual data to inform decision processes
3. Some institutions, including Oxford, also allow students to provide a contextual statement and/or statement of extenuating or special circumstances that may inform decision processes. Sensitive information will not normally be shared with assessors.



Contextual or extenuating?

1. Contextual – general background information e.g.

are in the first generation of your family to go to university;

have been in care for at least three months;

have been or currently are a carer;

are from a low-income background;

are a refugee;

are neurodivergent;

have or have had one or more disabilities or chronic illnesses that have affected you in education or at work

2. Extenuating – specific factors that have affected the strength of your application for which no mitigation was available e.g.

bereavement or medical issues during degree study and examinations



References

1. Think early about who your referees will be – usually academic staff or professional colleagues who are familiar with your work
2. Approach referees in good time to check that they can provide a reference – and what type of reference they can provide
3. Register referees in the application form as early as possible

References must be received by the course deadline - if references are late, applications might not be assessed.



→ Find more tips for references on our website
→ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/application-guide/references>



Decision timeline

- After the deadline, applications are checked and passed to the department for review.
- Depending on the course, you may be interviewed (usually online).
- You will usually find out by email whether your application is successful **8 to 10 weeks** after the application deadline.

→ Explore the decision timeline on our website:
www.graduate.ox.ac.uk/afteryouapply



Phil Brooks

The interview process

Assessors are generally looking for:

1. Evidence of academic and research ability
2. Motivation and enthusiasm
3. Understanding of the aims, objectives and remit of the programme/project you are applying for
4. Suitability of the programme/project to meet your aims
5. Ability to work in a team environment
6. Communication skills
7. Core competencies (e.g. problem-solving, quantitative skills)

The interview process

- May begin with a formal or informal interview with a supervisor prior to or after applying
- There may be one or more formal interviews (online or in person)
- Typically 30 minutes
- Prospective supervisors may or may not be present for the formal interview
- Doctoral interviews frequently include a short presentation or questions on previous research
- There may be a pre-interview test (depends on programme and subject area)
- Some interviews may include skills-based questions – e.g. maths or coding
- It is possible to request reasonable adjustments

Set yourself up for success - Part 1

- Ensure you are well aware of the background literature and context for your previous project(s)
- Keep a broad interest in the field and other research
- Be able to explain what you have done and directions for future work
- What challenges have you had to overcome? How did you approach them? (What does your answer say about you – resilience, commitment, creativity, willingness to seek assistance...)
- Be able to explain and justify your ideas for future work
- If asked to give a presentation – practice it, make sure you can stay within the time allowed, get feedback

Set yourself up for success - Part 2

- Ensure you are well aware of the potential project(s)/areas you are interested in
- What are the hypotheses/questions?
- What methods are involved?
- What challenges might you face?
- What excites you about it?
- What do you have questions about?

Set yourself up for success - Part 3

- Check whether the invitation to interview states which questions or topics will be discussed/addressed
- Prepare to address those questions/topics – think about a range of examples
- If you present your previous work, make sure you provide contextual information and state your aims/hypotheses clearly – remember that your interviewers will not be experts on your research topic
- The last question of the interview is likely to be “Do you have any questions?”

Interviewing as a returning student

If asked to present on previous research/work:

- Think carefully about what to present and if needed refresh your knowledge
- If relevant – consider how to present professional work in a way that demonstrates your potential as a doctoral student while retaining any essential confidentiality
- If necessary it may be possible to request an alternative – e.g. to give a presentation on a scientific paper of personal interest or set by the programme

Reflect on your strengths and how to demonstrate them

- Breadth of experience and professional skills
- Evidence of resilience, commitment and motivation
- Evidence of problem-solving and team skills
- Communication skills

Accessing Information

How to apply

- Apply and send all documents **online and by the deadline**
- Most deadlines are **12 midday UK time on the deadline date**
- Apply early– try to submit two weeks before your chosen deadline
- Application cap of **2 applications (3 if at least one is research)** per cycle – but strongly recommended to focus on **one application**





Oxford scholarships

- Each year new Oxford postgraduates benefit from **over 1,000 full or partial scholarships** offered by the University, its academic departments/units, colleges and others
- **About 50% of postgraduate students are fully funded**, either by Oxford or external funders, but disciplines have different levels of funding.



Phil Brooks



Applying for Oxford scholarships

- Make sure you **apply by the December/January deadline** for your course.
- A standard course application is required for the majority of our scholarships – you will be automatically considered if you meet eligibility criteria.
- Some schemes require additional material, e.g .supporting statements

→ Use our Fees, Funding & Scholarship Search tool to explore scholarships with additional requirements | www.graduate.ox.ac.uk/fundingsearch



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Top tips for funding

- **Make sure you're clear about likely costs** (fees *and* living expenses) – remember that the offer of a place doesn't guarantee funding
- **Check deadlines** and what, if any, supplementary materials are needed for particular scholarships
- **Don't wait** until you have an offer or start your course to sort out funding for future years
- **Work opportunities may be limited** so it is unlikely that you will have time to earn enough to fully support full-time study

→ Review our guidance and resources on finding funding for your course | www.graduate.ox.ac.uk/funding





Oxford's colleges

- All students are members of a department and **one of 43 unique colleges**
- Colleges are **small, multidisciplinary communities** with students and staff from different backgrounds and subjects
- Most colleges accept graduates and undergraduates, but some only accept graduates
- There is **no separate application for colleges**. All DPhil and masters' students have a guaranteed college place
- You don't have to give a college preference when applying



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