The Academic Career

Annett Schirmer
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Overview

1. What a PhD is for
2. Applying to Graduate School
3. Doing Well as a Graduate Student
What a PhD is for...

“I think we need to be really sure that students really, really want this. I mean, it’s not like a taught postgraduate degree, it’s not like an undergraduate degree; it’s something where they really...it’s got to be their enthusiasm that carries...carries it through at the end of the day, as much as their talent and their innate ability. I’m worried that part of this whole problem we’ve had with completion is partly that people are seeing the PhD as more just a kind of logical stepping stone rather than something they feel passionate about."

http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/rsv.php?page=326
What a PhD is for...

“I mean, I think … there is a point to holding a DPhil and the point is, in some sense, summed up in that you have some independence and being able to stand up and talk to other scientists and [...] that you’re capable of creating ideas and thoughts and research that other people want to listen to....”

“No one’s really that concerned that you have the last word on whatever your topic happens to be; it’s a research exercise, proving that you can, you know, do research in an organised and structured sort of way, and you can then go on and do whatever."

http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/rsv.php?page=326
What a PhD is for...

1. Preparation for an academic position

2. Preparation for a research position

3. Qualification for leading positions outside research and academia
What a PhD is for...

"It is no longer just about producing an original piece of excellent research; producing a trained researcher is an equally important output", Mary Ritter, Pro-Rector for Postgraduate Affairs at Imperial College, London and Chair of the UK GRAD Steering Group (Research Councils UK).

"PhD graduates have a significant career advantage [outside higher education] in comparison with their graduate peers from the same discipline without a PhD. Furthermore, the PhD provides an entrance ticket especially for elite positions - consider, for example, that 50% of the members of the board of the 200 biggest German companies have a PhD." (Enders, 2005, p122).
What a PhD is for...

Potential employers

Research Institutes (e.g., A*Star, Max Planck Institute, National Institute of Health)

Companies, governmental agencies, non-profit agencies (e.g., Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Education, Police)

Colleges and Universities
  ... with focus on teaching
  ... with focus on research & teaching
Overview

1. What a PhD is for
2. Applying to Graduate School
3. Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Applying for Graduate School

Before you apply

Get research experience in areas of interest

- Cognitive
- Developmental
- Industrial/Organizational
- Clinical
- Educational
- Social
- Biological

Decide on an area
Applying for Graduate School

Before you apply

Find good programs/researchers in that area

• International standing of the university (word of mouth/internet/published rankings)
• Productivity of the programs/researchers (program/researcher homepage, web of science)
  • Number and quality of (recent) publications
  • Awards
  • Grants
• Number of past/current students and success of these students
Applying for Graduate School
Before you apply

Famous Wundt Students:
Granville Stanley Hall
Oswald Kuelpe
James McKeen Cattell
Hugo Muensterberg
Edward Titchener
Charles Spearman
Applying for Graduate School
What will be considered for your application

- Research experience in your area
  - Work as a research assistant for one of your professors while you are an undergraduate
  - Do an honors thesis
  - Apply for a research assistant position with a potential supervisor
  - Do a Masters degree
Applying for Graduate School
What will be considered for your application

- Academic Markers
  - CAP
    - Subjects relevant to your PhD are most critical
  - GRE
    - Prepare for the test
    - The score will be used to compare you with other applicants
  - English Language Skills (Toefel)
Applying for Graduate School

*What will be considered for your application*

**Academic Promise**

- Relevant research skills (e.g., EEG)
- Evidence of work attitude and enthusiasm
- Your ability to think independently
- Your ability to write
Applying for Graduate School

What will be considered for your application

What is typically required for an application?

1. CV
2. Academic Transcripts
3. Test Scores (Toefel, GRE)
4. Personal Statement
5. Letters of Recommendation
Applying for Graduate School

Personal Statement

Basics

• Expected length is about 2 pages
• Writing
  • Clear and concise
  • No typos and grammatical errors
  • Don’t try to impress by using difficult words and constructions
• Tone
  • Not personal but professional
  • Confident but not pompous
• Feedback and revisions
  • Start this several months before submission

Applying for Graduate School
Personal Statement

Content

- Previous research experience
  - Describe past projects in detail to demonstrate your understanding
  - Indicate why you contributed (e.g., ISM) and what your tasks were
  - Indicate what skills you’ve learned from the project (e.g., programming)
  - Mention products of the work (e.g., conference presentation, paper)
  - Mention how the research experience has shaped your interests

Applying for Graduate School

Personal Statement

Content

• Previous research experience

• Current research interests
  • State 2 or 3 topics within your area.
  • Be not too broad ("all research in cognitive psychology") and not too specific ("influence of sleep deprivation on math skills")
  • Tailor your content to the faculty you’d like to work with (e.g., read their publications, contact them for preprints) and mention these faculty explicitly – why would they be a good match for you?
  • Try to aim for several faculty members to increase your chances of admission

Applying for Graduate School

Personal Statement

**Content**

- Previous research experience
- Current research interests
- Other relevant experience
  - Courses that you took the made you interested in a particular topic
  - Courses that you took in which you learned relevant skills

Applying for Graduate School

Personal Statement

Content

- Previous research experience
- Current research interests
- Other relevant experience
- Career goals
  - What do you want to do with your degree?
  - Most will prefer a student with the intention to pursue research in an academic setting

Applying for Graduate School

*Letters of Recommendation*

- Build a relationship with potential letter writers (they need to know you)
- Ask your letter writers at least 2 months in advance.
- Ask the letter writer if he/she would feel comfortable writing you a strong letter of recommendation
- Provide the writer with critical information
  - CV
  - Transcripts
  - Personal Statement
- Send a "gentle reminder" via e-mail a few days before the due date.
Applying for Graduate School

Interview

When you are shortlisted, ....

- Phone interview
- In-person interview
  - Typically a one or two day event
  - Chance to meet several faculty and current students
  - Likely all will evaluate you – so don’t underestimate student meetings
Applying for Graduate School

Interview – Dos and Don’ts

Be prepared

• Read up on the research of key faculty members
• Think of some research related questions to can engage faculty and students

Questions to ask

• Recent research developments
• Research collaborators (e.g., “I saw you are publishing with X, is X visiting your lab and interacting with students?)
• Expectations to work with several faculties
• Other training opportunities (e.g., grant writing, teaching)
• Funding for conferences
Applying for Graduate School

*Interview – Dos and Don’ts*

Be enthusiastic, knowledgeable, factual, inquisitive, friendly, open, secure, mature.

Don’t be ambivalent, tired, quite, shy, girlish, insecure, over-confident, pompous.
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
*Personality Traits of a Successful Student*

- Perseverant
- Intelligent
- Intellectually curious
- Creative
- Self-disciplined
- Self-motivated
- Good at time management
- Not easily intimidated by many hurdles
- Capacity for delayed gratification

Overview

1. What a PhD is for
2. Applying to Graduate School
3. Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Manage Your Supervisor

You were supposed to write a 2156 word long proposal.
How do you explain that extra word?
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Manage Your Supervisor

I’ve had my eyes on you for some time….
Just what is it you were supposed to do around here?
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Manage Your Supervisor

Supervisory Style Preferences Among University Professors

Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Manage Your Supervisor

What are your expectations of a supervisor?

- Topic/Course of Study (Who leads?)
- Contact/Involvement (How much is enough?)
- Thesis (What type of support?)
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Manage Your Supervisor

• Ask about her/his style of supervision and his expectations of you right from the beginning → Aim to fulfill these expectations
• Keep your supervisor informed of your progress (e.g., send short email once a week)
• Think ahead:
  • Come prepared to meetings (know the literature, develop ideas, foresee problems)
  • Try to find a solution to actual problems and present this solution to your supervisor
• Be around.
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Become an Independent Researcher

• Read the literature and know what’s going on in your field
• Acquire valuable skills (e.g., stats, programming, neuroimaging, writing, presentation)
• Attend research seminars, journal clubs, and seminars on professional development
• Do the best work you can
• Establish yourself
  • Speak at seminars
  • Attend conferences
  • Publish your work in international journals
  • Send your work to relevant figures in the field
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Pick up other useful skills

Work as a Teaching Assistant
- Seek advise and feedback from your supervisor
- Experiment – Your ratings don’t really matter yet
- Ask to do a lecture
- Find out whether teaching is for you…..

Try your hand with service
- Organize lab meetings
- Get involved in graduate student affairs
- Participate in scientific student societies
Doing Well as a Graduate Student
Pick up other useful skills

While you’re at it, consider the following questions…

• Do you want to pursue an academic career or one in private industry?
• Is teaching of primary importance to you, or do you wish to concentrate on research.
• Do you prefer a small liberal arts college or a large research university?
• Is location of concern?
• Do you want further training in a postdoctoral position, or are you prepared for an assistant professor position?
Doing Well as a Graduate Student

The Thesis

Traditional Qualities of a Thesis

Originality
Scholarship
Advancement of Knowledge

Ballard (1996)
Why are your examiners reviewing your thesis?

1. Sense of duty
   - Maintaining standards within the discipline
   - Professors are expected to review theses
   - Reciprocal obligation, engaged for the benefit of their own students

2. Interest (not many…)

Doing Well as a Graduate Student

The Thesis

Time devoted to reviewing the thesis

• 3-4 days full-time examination
• Many try to find uninterrupted time (e.g., weekend)
• Some read 3 to 4 times others only once

Doing Well as a Graduate Student

The Thesis

The review process

• Experienced examiners expect the thesis to pass (a revision would not only burden student and supervisor – but also the reviewer)

• First impressions count

• Different reading styles
  • Start with references, then the thesis while taking notes as they go
  • One read from start to finish and then a more detailed read with note taking

“Examiners assume PhD candidates are still apprentices in the profession of research in their discipline; and so their theses are judged in terms of current competence and future promise as academic colleagues. If there are particular problems, then the examiners regard the department, the supervisor and the candidate as all being potentially implicated; and if there are remarkable achievements, the recognition likewise extends beyond the performance of the individual candidate. Similarly, the examiners themselves are conscious that their own reputation is being judged through the quality of their reports.” (pp. 13–14, Ballard 1996)

Examiner questions

• How would they have tackled the problem set out in the abstract and the title?
• What questions would they like answers to?
• Do the conclusions follow on from the introduction?
• How well does the candidate explain what he/she is doing?
• Is the bibliography up to date and substantial enough?
• Are the results worthwhile?
• How much work has actually been done?
• What is the intellectual depth and rigor of the thesis?
• Is this actually ‘research’—is there an argument?

Doing Well as a Graduate Student

The Thesis

Characteristics of a poor thesis

• lack of coherence
• lack of understanding of the theory
• lack of confidence
• researching the wrong problem
• mixed or confused theoretical and methodological perspectives
• work that is not original
• not being able to explain at the end of the thesis what had actually been argued in the thesis
• sloppiness

Doing Well as a Graduate Student

The Thesis

Characteristics of a passable thesis

• Attention to detail
• Well structured argument
• Substantial in quality and quantity of work (for 2-4 good journal articles)
• Reflection (critical view of own work, not too critical!)
• Evidence of scholarship
  • Originality
  • Coherence
  • Sense of autonomy

What sways examiners?

• Prior publications by the candidate
• The international reputation of the candidate’s supervisor/institution
• Not: other examiners

Examiner “All PhDs are not equal and yet most get through. You form an impression that it is OK but not dazzling. This is often when the student applies standard theories in a rather pedestrian way. It’s not wrong, and you can’t fail it, but it’s not dazzling. In other cases you can see that the material is taken and used originally at every level—methodology, literature review, etc. Right from the beginning it makes you see an area that you thought you knew in a way that you hadn’t thought about before. “