

Studying for a Doctorate

Studying for a doctorate is a major undertaking, and not to be engaged in without strong reasons to succeed. Internationally, this is the highest qualification which can be earned for a programme of academic work. Higher doctorates (such as DSc - Doctor of Science, or DLitt - Doctor of Literature) exist, but are awarded much more rarely, and typically for prolonged achievement.

Universities which accept applicants for most full-time doctoral programmes expect their studies to take three years. The majority of those specialising in science or technology topics are full-timers, largely because they need regular access to a laboratory and/or expensive equipment. In other fields, though, it's not uncommon for people to tackle their project part-time, (often while in work) and therefore need sufficient interest and stamina to stick with it for five or six years.

Some doctorates include studying a syllabus; however, the large majority involve focusing exclusively on a topic proposed by the student and approved by the university. Each candidate is assigned someone to oversee their project, called a supervisor. This is usually a member of the academic staff of the department within whose field the student's topic falls. He/she is probably attracted by this topic, and may even enjoy a high reputation through published work related to it. Supervisor and student meet regularly to ensure the study maintains an appropriate pace and direction.

Most doctoral students believe that the qualification will confer career benefits. This is likely, but not certain. In some cases, the award's status alone will ensure this, and the topic itself shrink in importance. But in fields such as science and technology, topics must be chosen with great care, since post-doctoral work or study is likely to have a more precise focus still. In fact, career-wise, the doctorate will (to some) appear the start of a journey rather than the end of one.

Undergraduates needing a doctorate to fulfil specific career plans usually hope to begin it directly after their first degree. This means deciding on a topic early during their final year, in order to have time to make applications for places and funding. You must be on target for at least a class 2(i) degree to have a chance of either, and only those gaining a First can be confident of both.

Because each project is distinct, the doctoral student may seem to tread a lonely path. However, besides their supervisor, each student can enjoy the company and intellectual stimulation offered by others engaged in study at this level. Their heartfelt empathy and support should provide real comfort at 'sticky' points in the task, especially from those who've already overcome similar obstacles.

The report (called a thesis) written at the end of the doctorate is mainly what determines whether the student is successful. Typically between 70 and 100,000 words long, it includes an introduction to the topic, how data were gathered and findings reached, and the significance of the conclusions drawn. It acknowledges all sources, and is supposed to make what in the academic world is often referred- to as 'a contribution to knowledge'.

The submission of the thesis is soon followed by an exam known as a 'viva'. In this, the candidate is quizzed on their report by (normally) two or three established academics, usually including one from the university. Vivas typically last 1-3 hours, often starting with fairly gentle general questions, leading to more challenging and specific ones. In some cases, the thesis will have so impressed the examiners as to make the viva a formality; in others, a candidate's good performance may lead them to award a pass where they might otherwise have hesitated to.

Most theses pass with either no changes being required, or only minor ones. To some, however, major revisions will be requested, which the candidate must make, usually within a fixed period, such as three months. Most re-submitted theses will pass, but a few may be awarded only a Master's degree, and in fewer cases still, will be deemed to have failed. Outright failures, however, are rare.

Acquiring a doctorate entitles you to put 'Dr' before your name, and the letters PhD or DPhil after it.

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