Applying for PhD and Master’s Funding: Getting Started

Funding for a PhD or Master’s is, for many, a financial necessity. But it is also a selling point that can enhance your career prospects after the degree: a demonstrated ability to secure funding successfully will be looked on favourably by universities and organisations that rely on external sources of funding. Obviously, the more prestigious and competitive (naturally, the two generally run side by side) an award is, the more highly it will be valued – at least within academia. So it’s worth trying to get your head around the funding application process as early as you can in order to give yourself the best chance possible. This handout gives some general information and lists some of the key resources on the subject.

Eligibility

Before you bookmark applications that you want to apply for, it’s worth checking and double checking the eligibility criteria of the grant/award/scholarship/bursary in question. They can be very specific indeed! For example, one fund is for vegetarians and vegans only; another for those involved or with immediate family involved in the baking trade! However, more usual restrictions on eligibility relate to:

- Subject / discipline (sometimes this is very specific, e.g. ‘open to anyone writing a thesis on some aspect of late 15th-century English history’)
- Financial need
- Nationality / country of residence
- Academic merit
- Gender or ethnicity: some are for women only
- Student status: some are for current or final-year students only, or will only consider applicants with at least two or three years left of study (in the case of PhDs)
- Degree type: check whether the funding is for taught Master’s degrees, PhDs or postdoctoral research
- Disability: some are specifically for disabled students or those with long-term health / mental conditions or learning difficulties

Types of Funding

Remember, while some funds are designed to support your entire degree, others are intended for specific purposes, such as conference attendance, emergency financial support or covering the fourth year of the PhD (since few funding schemes cover more than three years full-time). Do take advantage of these small grants – every little thing helps, and many students are not aware of their existence!

Government Funding

The government has a new postgraduate loans system for Master’s courses since 2017/18 similar to the system used to cover undergraduate courses. FindAMasters.com has a useful overview of this, along with FAQs about eligibility - http://www.findamasters.com/funding/guides/new-uk-postgraduate-loans-scheme.aspx

And from 2018-19, a doctoral loan will be available for English and EU students undertaking a PhD at an English University. You can read an overview of the loan on our blog - https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/kingscareers/phd-loan-things-you-need-to-know/ or a more detailed guide on FindAPhD - https://www.findaphd.com/funding/guides/uk-phd-loans-scheme.aspx

Tips on Applying for Funding

- Start researching funding and compiling your application as early as possible. Many funders have an annual (and often early) deadline for applications, so you don’t want to miss it. Also, don’t underestimate how long it can take to write a good research proposal, especially if it’s your first attempt at one.
- If you and your department are eligible, apply for research council funding as a matter of priority – i.e. the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council and five others – see https://www.ukri.org/about-us/our-councils/ These are often the most competitive and prestigious grants.
- International students: check what your country’s government / British Council offers.
- Spend time getting your research proposal (if required) into an excellent shape – it forms a crucial and often decisive part of the funding application process. See our other handout, ‘PhD proposals for Arts & Humanities funding’ for guidance.
- Decide on your referees in good time before applying: you need to build in time to contact them and approach others if they decline.
- Likewise, build in time for obtaining any documents requested by the funding body, such as academic transcripts.
- In the case of PhD funding applications, get your (proposed) supervisor’s input; he or she is likely to have experience of the funding application process and the criteria that panels look out for.

Finding Funders: Some Useful Resources

King’s Postgraduate Funding database https://www1.kcl.ac.uk/graduate/funding/database/

This webpage provides information on current funding opportunities at King’s and general advice on other sources of funding that may help finance your postgraduate study. It includes funds for emergency support; funding from associations/small organisations; scholarships and trusts; funding for conference attendance; graduate teaching assistant schemes
King’s Graduate School Funding
https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/fees-and-funding/student-funding/index.aspx
Funding schemes for postgraduate taught and research students are added to this page as they become available.

Alternative Guide to Postgraduate Funding
https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/fees-and-funding/student-funding/alternative-guide-to-funding.aspx
Only 7% of students manage to get research council funding or university scholarships. But there are also plenty of charities and trusts that provide funding, open to students regardless of subject or nationality. Also gives plenty of guidance on funding applications. You’ll need to be logged into the King’s network to use this.

British Council Database
https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/options/scholarships-financial-support
Database listing thousands of scholarships including many open to international students, and scholarships and schemes partly managed or administered by the British Council itself.

Find a Masters
www.findmasters.com/funding
This webpage covers a wide range of opportunities available to support postgraduates, from student loans to international funding, Erasmus grants and the FindAMasters own scholarships. Their simple guides explain how different funding options work, what their eligibility criteria are and how to go about applying for them.

Jobs.ac.uk
www.jobs.ac.uk
It is worth signing up for emails from the academic jobs website as they often advertise Master’s and PhD studentships (frequently team-based).

Turn To Us
http://www.turn2us.org.uk/grants_search.aspx
Another great resource: highly recommended source of grants and other funding.

Prospects.ac.uk
www.prospects.ac.uk/funding_postgraduate_study.htm
Postgraduate funding database and guidance on different types of funding, including bank loans, employer sponsorship and disability-related funding.

Scholarship Search
www.scholarship-search.org.uk
UK scholarships database.

The Ultimate Postgraduate Funding Guide
www.postgrad.com/editorial/fees_and_funding/funding/postgraduate_student_funding_guide
Guidance and resources on postgraduate funding in Europe.

Finally... Don’t Give Up!
If you don’t succeed the first time, or even the second, try again! The author of this handout missed the AHRC deadline the first time around, started her PhD part-time, and was turned down when she applied in her first year – before successfully securing the AHRC grant the following year. Always check the restrictions on eligibility carefully – often even the most prestigious funding bodies accept applications midway through a PhD. In the meantime, support yourself through part-time work or bank loans, consider transferring to part-time student status and consider alternative, smaller funding schemes. Charities and trusts, for example, normally offer grants of between £500 and £2,000, but by securing multiple awards you can accumulate a decent sum – see the Alternative Guide to Postgraduate Funding for advice on these kinds of applications (above). These bodies also tend to have multiple application deadlines throughout the year.

Other Ways of Reducing your Budget
- Get a 16-25 Railcard for 1/3 off rail fares across the UK (£30, www.16-25railcard.co.uk, also available to full-time students over 25). You can even link your railcard to your Oyster card for additional discounts during off-peak hours. Really useful if you are not eligible for a student Oyster card!
- Take advantage of student discounts at participating shops, restaurants, cinemas, bars, gyms and cafés simply by flashing your KCL student card; discounts listed here: www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Student Discounts

Further Advice
KCL Careers & Employability: current students can book one-to-one appointments with Careers Consultants and Application Advisors. During these appointments, we will give you tailored advice on part-time work, CVs, cover letters and careers after the Master’s or PhD. Email careers@kcl.ac.uk, call 020 7848 7134 or use the King’s CareerConnect webpage mentioned below.

KCL Graduate School: confidential advice to prospective and current postgraduates on a variety of topics, including funding, via email, telephone and one-to-one appointments. Email graduateschool@kcl.ac.uk or call 020 7848 4146.

KCL Funding Office: confidential advice to prospective and current students on issues such as funding opportunities, living expenses and student loans. Email funding@kcl.ac.uk or call 020 7848 4362/4363/4471/4472.

Updated: November 2018

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Created: June 2014, by Dr Anabel Inge (recipient of three sources of PhD funding, including the AHRC). Updated: June 2018.
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