

Some advice on making an application for a PhD

Chris Mitchell

27th September 2013

Background

As an academic of well over 20 years standing, who has supervised between 30 and 40 PhD students and currently looks after admissions to a PhD programme, I have seen a large number of completed application forms and associated documents. Unfortunately, many of these have been fundamentally flawed, almost guaranteeing that the outcome was rejection. This is obviously unfortunate for many reasons. In the perhaps forlorn hope that a short document like this can improve the situation, I have tried to assemble some brief advice intended to help improve the likelihood of a favourable outcome for an application.

Guidance

Before completing a PhD application form and writing the supporting documentation, please read the following list. I have tried to put the most important things first.

- 1. Understand what will happen to your application.** Academic departments will often receive hundreds of applications to their PhD programme every year, and most will be rejected. The application form and associated documents are your main chance to persuade the department to take your application seriously – if it doesn't look as if you have tried very hard with your application, rejection will almost certainly be automatic. After all, if you cannot be bothered to produce a good application, why should anyone take it seriously? Also, make sure there is a good match between your interests and those of the academics in the department you are applying to.
- 2. Read the instructions.** I imagine that almost every department seeking PhD student applications will provide guidance on their website regarding the information they want. Please **read this very carefully**, and tailor your application to meet the stated requirements. Also, if the application form itself says that certain information is required, please make sure you provide it. The absence of key items of information may well mean automatic rejection. Finally, please try to give academic referees – references from established academics who know you personally will carry far more weight than references from anyone else.
- 3. Get the English¹ right.** Perhaps this should be at the beginning of the list. Please do whatever you can to make your application grammatically correct, including use of punctuation, spelling, etc. **If necessary, get help.** Writing a PhD thesis requires a good command of formal written English, and if you show you are unable to write correct English by submitting a poorly prepared document, then you can almost guarantee you will receive a rejection. This rule applies not only to the formal application, but to all other

¹ Or whatever language you are writing your application in.

correspondence **including emails**. While a certain level of informality is reasonable in emails, please write text in sentences using capital letters, punctuation, etc. You almost certainly won't be marked down for being too formal in your English, but an illiterate mess is almost certain to count against you.

- 4. Get the research proposal at the right level of detail.** Different departments, and different individuals, expect different things from a research proposal, but the main purpose is always to explain what topic areas you are interested in. In doing so, please do what you can to demonstrate your understanding of the area, e.g. by saying what relevant books and papers you have read, courses you have taken, and reports you have written (e.g. for an academic project). However, at least as far as I am concerned, a very detailed proposal saying what you will be doing in every week over three or four years is not helpful. Research directions change over time, and doing a PhD is not like an engineering project for which such detailed plans might make some sense. Doing a PhD is a journey where the destination is very uncertain (except, one hopes, that it involves a PhD degree).

It is fundamentally important to understand that research and engineering are not the same. They are both challenging and worthwhile activities. However, engineering does not necessarily involve extending the current understanding of the subject area, whereas research must. In particular, solving a real world problem of particular importance to you, your employer, or to the entire world, does not mean that you will have done any research – indeed, I am tempted to suggest that such a practical focus is unlikely to make a good focus for a PhD, no matter how worthwhile the activity in its own right. Instead you will have to rely on your supervisor to guide you towards academic questions, answers or partial answers to which will constitute research in your chosen subject area.

- 5. Keep your personal statement to the point.** If you provide a personal statement, please keep it brief and to the point; two or three paragraphs are probably enough. I would strongly recommend avoiding any mention of matters relating to religion or politics, and keep details of your outside interests (e.g. reading books, hill walking, cricket, or whatever) to a sentence or so. These matters are not relevant. What **is** relevant is why you want to do a PhD, and what aptitude you have for the endeavour. It is impossible to enumerate all the possible reasons for doing a PhD, but some reasons are more likely to make a favourable impression than others. Perhaps the best reason of all is the love of research for its own sake. Whatever reasons you choose to mention, make sure that they demonstrate you understand the nature of the activity involved in getting a PhD (see the previous point).
- 6. Be realistic about what a PhD can do for you.** This point is not strictly advice to help you fill out an application form, but it is so important in the context of applying to do a PhD that it deserves to be mentioned. As my own PhD supervisor said to me when I applied to do a PhD, please be aware that getting a PhD will almost certainly lose you money in the long run. You give up perhaps four years of salary, as well as the promotions that go with four years in a job, and in return you end up knowing a huge amount about a tiny area, which may well have no practical importance whatever. Getting a PhD is intended to train you to do academic research, is necessary if you want to be an academic, and is likely to be useful training for industrial research; otherwise it will be up to four years of hard work, all being well involving great enjoyment and feelings of achievement, that may not help your career at all, since doing academic research is a relatively specialist activity.