

Choosing a University for your PhD Study?

Since you are reading this, I am assuming you have looked carefully at your options, thought about the pros and cons of a PhD and finally decided to do one. Congratulations! You are in for four years of excitement and discovery (not just in your field but also in yourself)! Deciding to undertake a PhD in itself is a huge step. It is a very important decision that will affect you socially and financially and dramatically alter your career prospects.

However, now what? You know what to do but where? Choosing where to do your PhD can be as complicated as deciding whether to do a PhD at all. This will try to help you figure this out. An important caveat is in order. Deciding on a university is a very complicated and personal decision; so, it is difficult to come up with guidelines or tips. However, what you can find here is a list of questions you can ask yourself in order to navigate your options.

With whom do you wish to work? Who would your supervisor(s) be? Are they well-established? Have they made you feel supported in the application process (hinting at a good research relationship)?

If you are looking to do a PhD, you certainly feel inspired by some work that academics are doing in your field. The best way to engage with such work is to work with/under the professors, whose work you admire.

Go through the literature. Read! Read! Read! Identify the work you find most interesting and start noting down where the academics who have done the work are based. A few names, departments, and universities would pop in. Now, you already know where you want to work.

It is your supervisor(s). Mostly, who will determine how your PhD journey would go. When you get a chance for an interview or a discussion with a potential supervisor(s), ask them many questions. What kind of research or projects are they doing now? What modules do they teach in the department? Who are their colleagues and how can they be useful for your research? How

many students have they supervised before? What is the teaching or research opportunities they or the department can provide?

Ask questions about how supervision works. The department provides general guidelines on how the supervision should take place- the style, frequency and other things. However, the student and the supervisor can design what fits the best for them. Also, it is your thesis and not your supervisor(s). Though our supervisor(s) might have a great deal of knowledge on the subject area, they are not the experts in the niche area that you are working on- YOU ARE (OR GOING TO BE)!. Their job is to get you there. It would be mainly you steering your project. Your supervisor(s) are there to help you if you digress though.

Inform them of any concerns you have and what they can do to provide support in such matters. Your supervisor ideally should not only limit themselves by giving feedback on drafts. They should help you develop a network- inform you of the trends happening in the field, upcoming conferences, seminars, and symposiums, and people with whom you can get in touch for academic purposes. Academia is small; everyone knows everyone else working in the same field. They can surely get you in touch with them. Remember! You need to form a relationship with your supervisor(s). Ideally, this should last even after the end of your PhD, when you would both be colleagues.

Which University? Which Department? Which City?

The city is important. If you are in the UK, then it is usually a good idea to visit the city and get a feel for it. You will be living here for a substantial amount of time in your life. Depending on what your priorities are, see if the city caters to your needs. How expensive is the city? How far or near is it to big cities or the countryside? Does it have facilities necessary for your research- institutions, labs, research organizations, libraries, museums or archives? The institutions and organizations usually invite speakers and hold seminars and exhibitions which can help your research. Do you know people in the city- friends, relatives or any kind of support system? Does the city have cafes,

clubs, pubs, specific cuisine restaurants or stores? It might sound trivial but living here for 3-4 years means becoming a part of the city, and these things matter.

Of course, the university matters. If you get a chance, visit the university. Visit the department and the school. Do they have adequate infrastructure- laboratories, 24/7 libraries, student unions, any special collections or archives, sports facilities. It is also worth meeting current students to hear what doctoral experiences have been like. Are they adequately supported by their supervisor, school and the department? Do they have access to resources and do the institutions help them with this sufficiently? If you have a global majority background or an international student or have a disability, ask the staff and the students whether they provide enough support.

Who would be your peers? What is the research group like?

I cannot emphasize more. Though PhD is quite an individual journey, you need to have a support system. If you manage to meet a few current students, try to get useful insights from them. What is it like to be part of a research group? Do they get to present at international conferences? How easy is it to get time off? Are the staff reasonable in expecting results? Are the PhD students happy or stressed? Are they happy about their work? These are all worth keeping in mind when making your choice.

And most importantly, do you have funding available in the university?

Academia is borderless but not the real world. (For International students) Many times, your nationality will define which country you can go to and study. Mostly, you will get a visa for studies but getting funding is difficult. They are rare and super competitive. However, this should not discourage you; a range of scholarships is available for international students. Studying abroad also means broadening your horizon beyond your PhD, therefore finances are an important factor in your decision.

Should I self-fund my PhD?

A few students do self-fund. However, I do not personally recommend this. The tuition fees are high and living costs are increasing day by day. Not to mention the international rate is way higher than the home rate. Three years is a long time and would come up with its own ups and downs.

What about employability?

It is worth looking at what employability has looked like for graduating students. A PhD is ultimately also a gateway into employment, and we tend to overlook that during the admissions process, but it is a very vital part of making a university decision. Some programmes have relatively more recruiters than others.

These days what skills current recruiters are looking for in PhD graduates are grant-making skills. How much funding you can bring for the department in which you will be recruited is considered important these days. Having funding as a PhD student therefore relatively increases your chances.

It is worth drawing a picture of how all of the answers to these questions weigh on your own academic priorities, and this will give you a far more holistic picture than ranking or any other metric. Ultimately, your PhD journey is a unique journey. Brace yourself with the right resources, support, and determination, and it will be an experience you will always remember. All the best! Feel free to reach me at excy@liverpool.ac.uk for any inquiries.

PS: My decision was ultimately determined by the fact that my supervisors are very well-established in the field, and I would never have given up the chance to work with them. Plus, the specific scholarship I am on can potentially give me a leg-up for hiring committees post-graduation.