

Thinking About Further Study After CEU?

What you need to know

Before you Start Applying

Motivation and Goals

It's important to clarify a few things for yourself before you embark on the process of identifying programs and applying to do further study. Questions to consider include:

- Why do you want to pursue doctoral study?
- What longer-term goals will pursuing doctoral study help you achieve?
- How does pursuing a doctoral degree fit with the professional field you want to enter?
- Is a doctoral degree a requirement to advance in your chosen career path?
- How do you imagine you will spend your time as a doctoral student? Are your ideas realistic?

Doctoral degrees are different from bachelor's and even master's degrees in that they are usually far narrower in focus and require much more independent work. Embarking on a doctoral program is a significant commitment, as most people take between four and seven years to complete their degrees.

Doctoral degrees were originally conceived of as training for people who would go on to work in academia, usually through a combination of teaching and research, and this is reflected in the structure of most doctoral programs. Some professional degrees are designed to give you the practical skills necessary to be leaders within a specific industry or employment setting, such as education, law or business.

It is increasingly common for people who pursue doctoral degrees to work outside of academia. Sometimes, this is a choice. It is also a reflection of changes in the academic job market, at least in some geographies and for some subjects.

"They say it is a lonely journey, but you never know what it means until you get there. It is not a scary place but certainly confusing. Doing a PhD is not just a job or a transition to one, but a life experience that puts you in a situation to ask yourself a lot of questions."

- CEU SPP alum and current doctoral student

Additional Resources:

[To PhD or not to PhD](#), Craig Zelizer (SOI '95), *Medium*, 13 September 2017

[Not for Love or Money: Why do a PhD?](#), Anamaria Dutceac Sebesten, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2012

[Advice on Navigating the Current Academic Job Market](#), Dr. Alvaro Huerta, Stanford, Tomorrow's Professors Postings

Is now the right time to apply?

Researching programs and putting together a competitive application is time consuming. Before you begin the process, it is important to consider whether you can realistically set aside enough time or whether applying at a later stage would make more sense. Some things you should keep in mind regarding timing:

- Is it feasible for you to prepare competitive applications for doctoral programs and at the same time manage your existing workload and maintain a good academic record?
- Are standardized tests (such as the GRE) commonly required in your field of study? Do you have time to prepare for and complete them before the application deadlines?
- Is professional experience considered an asset in your area of interest? Would taking time to gain additional work experience before applying make you a more competitive applicant?

Finding the Right Programs and Potential Supervisors

Many application deadlines, though not all, will be set for a date in the fall or early winter the academic year before you would start doctoral study, if accepted. This means that in most cases you need to apply almost a year before the start date. A PhD is a long and rigorous degree, and the application process reflects that. Ideally you should begin the process of narrowing down your interests and comparing schools and programs the spring before the application period.

It's a common practice to reach out to potential supervisors in advance to signal interest and ask questions about the program, their supervisory style, whether they will be taking on new advisees, and the like. However, it is only wise to do this after you have done your research and via respectful, tailored, personalized emails. If the university or department website advised against reaching out, or if the faculty member's personal webpage or bio says this, then of course don't do it.

You have a higher likelihood of receiving replies from potential supervisors if you approach them months in advance rather than couple of weeks before the application deadline, when their inboxes have already been flooded with emails from interested students.

"Try and think about people rather than schools. (...) think in terms of your possible supervisor. Try to identify people. Look at their backgrounds. What are they good at? How do they approach their research? (...) Try to identify what research path you would like to take and identify the best way to do it and the best people who could possibly navigate you through this process. And potentially, think of not just one person, not just the potential supervisor, but think about the entire group of people, because at the end of the day you will have to defend your research in front of a supervisory panel, and so would be great to have more people who could help you, who could advise you, and who could be instrumental throughout your doctoral studies."

- Current doctoral student at CEU

The table below is intended to help you with the process of narrowing down your interests and finding the right schools and departments.

STEPS	GUIDING QUESTIONS	WAYS TO GET ANSWERS
1. Narrow down your interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are you passionate about? - What topic could you imagine yourself researching for 4-7 years? - Is your potential topic an area in which you will be able to produce original knowledge? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk to CSO / faculty / alumni / mentors - Browse journals & articles - Examine online resources - Attend conferences and network
2. Compare schools and departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How well do your interests match with the research done in a particular department? - What are the program requirements? - Employment rate of recent graduates - Faculty availability, class sizes - Facilities - Funding - Location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connect with current students (conferences, events, LinkedIn...) - Look into what current PhD students and faculty are researching - Contact faculty - Attend online information sessions - Visit campuses, if possible

Additional Resources:

- [PhD Portal](#)
- [PhDs.org](#)
- [Find a PhD](#)

Application Process

Once you have identified the programs you would like to apply for, it is time to start preparing your applications.

Application process checklist:

- Start as early as you can
- Familiarize yourself with application requirements and deadlines
- Complete standardized tests (if necessary)
- Ask for letters of recommendation
- Write statement of purpose and/or a research proposal
- Prepare your academic CV
- Get feedback (ideally from multiple people)
- Proofread everything. Do this many times and ask others to do it too, you don't want sloppy grammar and spelling mistakes to ruin your application!)
- Submit complete applications (on time!)

“Start early! Make sure you have your CV ready on your desktop. Find a moment during your weekly schedule, let's say Monday and Friday, to spend 2 to 3 hours researching new opportunities and applying. Not late in the evening ... make it a part of your working schedule if you consider it a priority. Writing a statement of purpose is always a challenge. Make it short and concrete, skip the clichés and make sure you can justify your choice of program, topic etc.”

- CEU SPP alum

Statement of Purpose

A Statement of Purpose is a crucial part of your application, and often the hardest part to write. The goal of the Statement of Purpose is to give the admissions committee a good sense of the kind of person you are, the experience and skills you have, and your motivation to study in a particular program. Broadly, your statement of purpose should cover the following:

- Who are you?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your past experiences?
- Why do you want to pursue graduate study?
- Why is this institution the right one for you?
- Why have you chosen this particular program?
- Why do you want to work with this particular supervisor?

A Statement of Purpose should be specific. It's not enough to state that you are passionate about your field of study. You need to explain why. You also want to avoid lofty and cheesy statements that are not backed by concrete examples.

A Statement of Purpose should always be tailored, since in addition to your academic credentials and professional experience, you are evaluated based on how good of a fit you are for the institution. To successfully tailor your Statement, you should familiarize yourself with the mission, values, and culture of the university.

Research Proposal

A Research proposal is a concise summary of your research. Its main purpose is to convince the reader of your ability to produce a unique and relevant piece of research. As such, in a research proposal you should demonstrate your familiarity with your chosen field, show that your ideas have a strong academic basis and that you can access or collect the necessary data, and demonstrate that your project is realistic given the time-frame and available funding.

To write a compelling Research Proposal, you should be able to answer the following:

- What do you plan to do?
- Why do you want to do it?
- Why does it matter?
- How do you plan to do it?

Sample structure:

1. Introduction to topic
2. Personal interest
3. Background literature
4. Aims and objectives - research questions/statements
5. Methodology/framework
6. Methods/research design
 - a. sample and setting
 - b. data collection
 - c. data analysis and ethics
7. Summary
8. Supplementary information i.e. references, appendices, timeline, resources

"First of all, I think that the research proposal matters the most in the application package. Having more or less a clear idea regarding the main debates in the field in which you are planning to conduct your research, being able to identify the main gaps and articulate where your research fit are crucial aspects."
-CEU History alum

Additional Resources:

[How to write a statement of purpose](#), CEU Center for Academic Writing

[Sample Statements of Purpose](#), CEU Center for Academic Writing

[How to write a research proposal](#), CEU Center for Academic Writing

Academic CV

For the purpose of applying to doctoral schools, you should prepare an academic CV that emphasizes your research and teaching experience.

You can find a template and more information on how to draft an academic CV from the [CEU Career Knowledge Hub](#).

Letters of Recommendation

Most programs ask you to submit 2-3 letters recommendation. It is important to carefully consider the people who would be able to write the most compelling letters for you. Apart from validating the information you have provided in your application, the admissions committee relies on letters of recommendation to get a better sense of who you are as a person and what is your motivation to pursue further studies in your field of interest.

Who to ask?

When you are thinking about who to ask, consider the following:

- What qualities is the program you are applying to looking for in a candidate?
- Who can positively describe these relevant qualities?

- Who knows you well and has been involved in your academic and professional development?
- Who could include something in the letter that is missing from the rest of your application?
- Who would be enthusiastic about writing you a letter of recommendation?
- What combination of recommenders would guarantee that different sides of you and your ability to operate in variety of contexts is covered?

How to ask?

- Contact recommenders well in advance (ideally you should give them at least a month)
- In your request, include:
 - Information about the program(s) you are applying to
 - Brief relevant bullets for each application, including reminders of particular papers, assignments, or conversations the recommender could include in their letter
 - List of academic and personal strengths and achievements you would like them to highlight
 - Academic CV
 - Statement of purpose/research proposal
- Send a polite reminder a week or two before the deadline
- After they have submitted their letter, **thank them!**
- Once you know, inform them about the outcome of your application (even if you didn't get in) and thank them again.