

# Thinking about doing a Doctorate in Social Work?

Key questions and useful  
information



A BASW Guide

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## Introduction

This Guide is a brief introduction to thinking about whether undertaking a doctorate in social work is for you. It has been prompted by an increasing number of social workers contacting BASW around the process of undertaking a doctorate as well as the possible content of a doctorate.

Many social work skills learned in practice are transferrable to undertaking a doctorate and in undertaking doctoral studies you will gain new knowledge, learn new skills, develop new insights and, upon successfully completing the doctorate, add to the store of knowledge in social work. Undertaking a doctorate is also demanding so the Guide aims to be realistic about securing a place and effectively maintaining your studies through to successful completion.

Like any academic or career choice, undertaking – or not undertaking – a doctorate in social work is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’. Rather it is a matter for the individual to decide what might be right for them in their specific circumstances and then determining how they might achieve this goal. This Guide sets out some of the key issues to consider and provides useful information to help this process and covers both doctorates (PhD) and professional doctorates (Prof Doc). Successful completion of either a PhD or a Prof Doc allows you to style yourself as ‘Dr’.

The Guide makes no recommendations about specific areas of study, or specific universities where a doctorate might be undertaken, but instead seeks to encourage readers to think about the sort of questions they might want to ask of themselves, their potential supervisors and the universities they are in contact with. Further, the tuition fees, and the academic rules and regulations that apply to doctorates differ between universities so while the Guide gives a general overview readers should not rely on this in dealing with specific universities but always seek information directly from the university.

Undertaking a doctorate varies considerably between countries so while it is entirely possible to study for doctorates at a university outside of the UK this guide applies only to doctorates in the UK.



## Why do a doctorate?

The reasons for doing a doctorate might include one, some, or all of the following:

- To inspire change, to face the issues and challenges experienced in practice and to empower marginalised voices.
- The desire to shape the profession by contributing to new knowledge.
- A strong interest in, or love of, a particular area of social work knowledge or expertise.
- To work with fellow researchers and academics who you hold in high esteem and to make new connections nationally and internationally.
- A desire for career progression (although there is not a straight 'read across' from securing a doctorate to securing a promotion or a new role).
- The need to have a doctorate. For example, social work educators in universities are increasingly expected to have, or be studying for, a doctorate.

Understanding your motivation will play an important part in determining whether a doctorate is for you and as part of this it is also important to be realistic about what can and cannot be achieved through securing a doctorate.

## Social work skills and doing a doctorate

Many social work skills are useful in undertaking a doctorate. The skills developed in practice can equip social workers to make the transition from practitioner to researcher. These include:

- An ability to listen to service users, to seek to understand, to communicate with respect and empathy, are fundamental to ethical research.
- An ability to undertake purposeful interviews of people who have particular needs, or who face specific challenges.
- An ability to work autonomously while managing competing priorities.
- A good knowledge of how social work organisations work in real life - an essential requirement for the realistic development and delivery of a research plan.

- An ability to assess and manage risk that helps enable social workers to present an informed and realistic ethics proposal.
- An ability to undertake analysis and decision making based on a wide range of evidence including interviews, observation, the contextual situation and documentation.
- An ability to reflect on this analysis and decision making including the need to consider how personal and societal bias may influence decisions.

## How is a doctorate different?

Undertaking a doctorate is both qualitatively and quantitatively different to doing a Bachelor's or Master's degree.

A doctorate is qualitatively different since any doctoral thesis must demonstrate the generation of an 'original contribution' to the existing body of social work knowledge. This knowledge needs to be 'original', not in the sense that it is novel to the student, but 'original' to the academic discipline of social work. 'Original' can also mean exploring a subject in a different way, for instance by using a different research methodology or exploring a topic with a particular group of people, area of practice or location.

As generators of an 'original contribution' doctoral students should be capable, comfortable and confident in developing their ideas, and their sources of evidence, while also being open to being challenged and hearing alternative viewpoints, including from their doctoral supervisors.

A doctorate is quantitatively different both in the duration of study (three to five years minimum), and in the length of the thesis.

Traditionally a PhD is more 'theoretical' than a Prof Doc and a Prof Doc is more 'applied' than a PhD. However, these terms can feel relative.

## What will I learn by doing a doctorate?

By completing a doctorate, you will increase your knowledge, become adept at gathering, screening and digesting information, determining the value of decisions, and undertaking research and analysis. Your written and verbal communication skills will also improve significantly as will your ability to present on topics and to network. While your particular area of specialist study might or might not be of interest to an existing or future employer the other skills you will acquire are transferable to the workplace.

## The basic academic requirements of a doctorate

Some individuals go straight from a Bachelor's degree to successful completion of a doctorate without undertaking a Master's, however, this is increasingly unusual. Increasingly, there is an expectation that doctoral candidates have a Master's, or (with funded doctorates) candidates are increasingly expected to complete a Master's degree in Research, or equivalent, before progressing to a doctorate.

A high rate of withdrawal / drop-out for students undertaking doctoral studies is not unheard of. This is perhaps due both to the demands of the work required and the extended duration of study. While life's challenges can happen at any moment the sheer duration of undertaking a doctorate means that significant life events (the arrival of a child, major sickness, relationship break up, caring responsibilities, bereavement) are more likely to interrupt studies.

Non-completions of doctorates are an issue for universities. It is frustrating for the supervisors, but non-completions also count against the department in the Research Evaluation Framework (or REF) a key measure of how universities are ranked and therefore the funding they receive.

Consequently, universities have screening processes to ensure that candidates are potentially capable of completing a doctorate. These screening processes will occur not only at the point of application but throughout the doctoral process and are sometimes described as 'progression points'.

## How long does a doctorate take?

The minimum period for completing a full-time PhD is usually three years. The maximum period for completing a part-time PhD or Prof Doc is usually five years.

However, this 'core period' is preceded both by preparation to register as a doctoral student and once the thesis is submitted, further work then follows.

Prior to applying to register as a doctoral student careful preparation is needed. While the application itself can be relatively quick to write, considerable thought in advance is needed, especially if funding is sought. Preliminary reading around the subject, determining the initial area of study, discussions with a potential supervisor and considering funding options can easily last up to a year, sometimes much longer. The practice of some funding windows being open a relatively short time adds to the need that most of the proposal for study is already decided and agreed.

Once a place is secured, doctorates must be completed within a certain period of time (usually three years full-time, five years part-time). 'Failed stages' may be re-taken and 'extensions' can be granted (there is a formal process to go through) but there is a limit to the number of resubmissions and duration of extensions and consequently some doctoral students are simply 'timed out'.

Nor is submission of the doctoral thesis the end. There is then the *viva voce* – or oral exam. At this oral exam, the student is expected to defend their thesis in discussion with two recognised academic experts in the subject area. The *viva voce* can be from three to six months *after* the submission of the thesis.

The examiners then decide whether the doctoral degree can be awarded. The options are pass without amendments (which is highly unusual), pass with minor amendments, pass with major amendments and resubmission. Further time is then allocated for the student to make the amendments (usually three months for minor amendments, six months for major amendments and a year for resubmission). The amendments then need to be approved by the examiners before a submission to the relevant

university awards committee with the recommendation that the doctoral degree is awarded.

In 'straightforward' cases therefore, it may take up to nine months *after* submission of the thesis that the doctorate is awarded and the student may finally style themselves 'Dr'.

## Choosing a subject for your doctorate

It is no exaggeration to say that choosing the right subject is the key to successful completion of your doctorate. Major considerations include:

- Is there enough material to keep you occupied for three years (full-time) or five years (part-time)? Further, will this material keep you engaged for the time required - loss of interest in your chosen subject can be fatal to completing your doctorate.
- Is your proposed area of research going to yield an 'original contribution'?

A good test is to read what you can on your chosen subject *before* you start the application process and establish if you can identify the gaps in knowledge and discuss this with an academic (either a potential supervisor or a previous tutor).

The third question to consider is:

- Is your chosen subject just too difficult to research? Remember that the doctorate will involve research with real people and the nature, the scale or the sensitivity of the research may simply be too hard to deliver. Aspects of this question will be returned to throughout your studentship under the guidance of your supervisor.

A key consideration here is the university departmental Ethics Committee. Because of abuses by researchers in the past the role of the Ethics Committee is to decide whether a doctoral student's research proposals are ethical. Central to this are the concepts of 'informed consent', 'assent', and 'sensitive subjects'. Since much social work involves working with 'vulnerable' people, or people under 18, demonstrating that research participants understand what they are being involved in and demonstrating consent can be difficult. 'Sensitive subjects' include ethnicity,

gender, sexuality, criminal activity, drugs, alcohol, mental health and many others where the Ethics Committee may perceive potential risk of the research to participants, the researchers or to the institution.

Since most social work research necessarily involves both 'vulnerable people' and 'sensitive subjects' developing a research proposal that addresses both these issues and meets the requirements of the Ethics Committee can be particularly challenging.

The fieldwork aspect of your research (for example, interviewing) cannot start until approval has been given by the Ethics Committee. Some research proposals may need further approval by another Ethics Committee (for example, either at the university, or local authority or health authority) further complicating and extending the process.

Again, an early conversation with an academic who has experience of supervising doctorates in social work will give you an indication of whether your proposed idea might yield an 'original contribution' and how realistic your research proposals might be.

## Choosing a supervisor and a university

The role of the doctoral supervisor is to help you refine your research ideas into a body of work that is both achievable and will meet the criteria to award a research degree. This may include suggested reading, some coaching and challenging you to justify your proposals.

Some individuals start with choosing a university, and then look for a supervisor. Other individuals secure consent from a supervisor and then registration with the supervisor's university follows. Both approaches are valid.

You may know a potential supervisor already, and/or you may have read their publications and as a result are interested in having them as your supervisor. Potential doctoral supervisors may advertise on their personal university webpage stating whether they are available for doctoral supervision and the research topics they are interested in supervising.

Many universities will also offer a second supervisor. This offers a second opinion to the

first supervisor and may also take over as first supervisor, if, for whatever reason, the first supervisor needs to withdraw (for example, they get a new job at another university).

Another option is to choose a university first. You may know the department from your previous studies, or you may wish to choose an entirely new university. If you opt for this route, and you make a successful application to be a doctoral student, you will be allocated a supervisor.

The shift to online working has greatly expanded the range of universities that would-be doctoral students can consider.

Whatever route you chose, a good working relationship between supervisor and doctoral student is crucial. As a doctoral student you will be meeting and working with the supervisor over several years, so it is important to meet with your potential supervisor as part of your decision-making process – personal compatibility and an ability to work together are key.

While your doctoral supervisor will support (and challenge) you in your research studies it is important to remember that as a doctoral student you, and not your supervisor, are in the business of generating an 'original contribution'. It is no exaggeration to say that you are at the boundaries of social work knowledge. Consequently, you should be comfortable with being an independent learner capable of evidencing and justifying your developing work.

## The elements of a doctorate

The content, methodology and style of successful doctoral theses vary considerably. However, they have the following elements in common:

- The research question - this is the question that the research sets out to answer.
- A literature review - the specific areas of existing knowledge to which you will contribute by answering your research question
- The methodology and methods - how you will answer your research question
- The research design - how you intend to undertake your research
- The ethics application
- The implementation of your research design

- The write up of your findings
- A theoretical analysis of your findings
- Conclusion – what do we know now that we didn't know before?

To repeat the point made earlier, undertaking a doctorate gives you the opportunity to learn these skills: how to develop a research question, the different types of literature review etc. With Prof Docs and some PhDs there *may* be a taught element in the first years, however, this will likely focus on research and study skills (for example, using software packages such as SPSS or NVIVO).

With both PhDs and Prof Docs there may be the opportunity to join more general lectures or modules to help give you the theoretical and methodological knowledge to conduct your research (for example on quantitative methods or qualitative methods), however, it is worth remembering that since a doctorate should provide an 'original contribution' your choice of subject is, by definition, far too specialist to be actually taught to you by someone else.

## Full time or part time?

There are essentially three options: (1) undertake a doctorate full time (2) undertake a doctorate part-time and work part time (for example, study part of the week and practice as a social worker part of the week) (3) work full time *and* undertake the doctorate (some universities do not allow this last). Determining what is best for you relies on an honest assessment of both your needs, your family circumstances, your resources and your capacity. For example, you may not be able to consider doing a doctorate full-time because you cannot afford to pay the fees and be without an income. At the other end of the scale working full time and undertaking a doctorate simultaneously is possible - but it is also extremely demanding. This leads to the next question.

## How many hours a week will I need to spend on my doctoral studies?

A full – time PhD takes a minimum of three years, by extension a five-year part-time doctorate implies three year's work spread over five years. Some universities will give guidance as to how many hours a week minimum their doctoral students are expected to work.

Doctoral students are also expected to see their supervisors once a month, and this may well involve preparation and submission of written work in advance of the session.

It is also true to say that within these frameworks that 'it depends'. For example, a major part of undertaking a doctorate is reading and writing. Some people read quicker than others, and some people write quicker than others. In undertaking a doctorate those who can read and write more quickly are clearly at an advantage when it comes to the optimal use of limited time. It is also important to think about how you currently spend your time. If your idea of enjoyment is reading books and journal articles on social work, then that is probably a positive indicator for dealing with the workload that a doctorate generates.

Unlike those forms of academic accreditation that are assessed through examinations, it is not possible to 'cram' for a doctorate. Undertaking a doctorate needs a steady application of work over a sustained period. As with any workload, there will also be peaks and troughs as particular deadlines have to be met or are successfully negotiated. There will also be setbacks, for example, you may start on your doctorate confident of your research topic, only to undertake the literature review and find that the area has already been comprehensively researched.

Doctoral students are also expected to present papers at conferences and, if possible, submit articles for publication.

## Other challenges

In undertaking a Bachelor's or Master's degree there is a student cohort studying alongside you. Some of the cohort may be actively supportive of you, but at the very least there may be a shared sense of facing adversity together (for example, the deadline for the next assignment). With a doctorate there is often no student cohort, and this can lead to feelings of isolation. The very nature of studying in a highly specialised area, at the boundaries of social work knowledge, can compound this. There might be only a handful of people across the UK who understand, or are interested in, your specialist area of research. And, of course, simply because they exist does not necessarily mean you have any contact with them.

Compared to the general population a high proportion of doctoral students face mental health problems. What is not clear is whether people with certain mental health dispositions are attracted to doctoral studies or whether the nature of doctoral studies engenders mental health issues in individuals. For a fuller description and discussion of the issues see the work of Hazell *et al* in the suggested reading list.

Universities are aware of these problems. Some supervisors have access to a team who work together and support one another. Some departments do provide desk space for their doctoral students, but in an age when working from home is increasingly common, doctoral students may well find they are sitting in an empty office at the university. Some universities organise evening seminars that bring together research students from (say) the wider faculty so that even if the students do not share the same discipline, they at least have in common the experience of undertaking a doctorate.

## Funding a doctorate

There are two ways to pay for your doctorate: as a 'self-funder' or funded by another body.

If you are putting an application together for a funding body, it is essential to have your potential supervisor involved in the process. This is because securing funding from a funding body is a highly competitive process. Application processes can also be complex, may not fit with your own timelines and can change from year to year. Additionally, funding may be tied to specific topics: you may wish to undertake your research in the area of children and families but find that the funder is only funding doctorates in adult social care. If you are unsuccessful in your first application, it may well be worth re-working the application and resubmitting in the following year.

There is no one source of information on funding opportunities. BASW advertises doctoral funding opportunities if and when they become known to BASW. Because these are 'time critical' these are advertised in the bulletin. Funding opportunities will vary between the four countries of the UK.

Once registered on a doctorate for some students there may be an opportunity to undertake paid teaching work for the department (more likely if you are undertaking a PhD rather than a Prof Doc). However, hourly rates are low (considerably lower than social work hourly rates) and the work available may be patchy, so this possibility is best seen as an opportunity for experience and supplementary income rather than any financial solution.

Universities may also have scholarships that doctoral students can apply for. Some scholarships pay both tuition and living expenses and some only pay tuition or part tuition. Any amount paid for living expenses will be substantially lower than that of a salary of a social work practitioner.

As a result, many doctoral students are 'self – funders', and this is particularly true of those undertaking professional doctorates.

## Additional costs

University tuition fees are not the only cost: other potential costs include a laptop, books, research costs and print costs.

- You may already own a laptop. But if you rely on a laptop provided by your employer either your employer and/or the university may have protocols in place that prevent you from having confidential research material on a laptop owned by someone else.
- The very nature of the doctorate means that you will need to access specialist books often on a weekly basis. This means either frequently travelling to the university library (made harder and more costly if your home is some distance from the university) or making things less complicated by buying the books instead – but at a significant cost.
- There may be costs associated with your research. This might involve travel to interview your research participants and a digital recorder for interviews. It is then necessary to write up any interviews (transcription). Doctoral students can and do transcribe interviews themselves, but it is immensely time consuming. Paying for a transcription service is quick and effective but it is costly.
- There may also be costs in attending relevant conferences.
- Spending time on the screen in the evening, particularly after a day at work on the screen, can be tiring. Some students prefer to print off some documents to read and edit. This involves having a printer, ink cartridges and paper. And while some universities have moved to online submission of the actual thesis, some universities require multiple hard copies of the printed and bound thesis.
- Finally, once you have successfully secured your doctorate there may well be additional costs if you want to attend your graduation ceremony.

## Conclusion

Undertaking a doctorate can be immensely rewarding but it is also demanding. The Guide has set out some of the key issues, however, if you now decide to take this further, the next step is to talk to a potential doctoral supervisor at a university. What potential supervisors are likely to be looking for in this discussion will probably include your potential to undertake a doctorate, a possible research area and funding options. Making a case in writing, in advance of the meeting, of what you want to research and why, will help you get the most out of this session.



## Suggested reading

Dunleavy P (2015) *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*. London: Palgrave/MacMillan.

Hazell C, Niven J, Chapman L, Roberts P, Cartwright-Hatton S, Valeix S, Berry C (2021) *Nationwide Assessment of the Mental Health of UK Doctoral Researchers*. <https://psyarxiv.com/cs73g>  
Accessed 8th Feb 2022.

Liechty JM, Liao M, Schull CP (2009) *Facilitating dissertation completion and success among doctoral students in social work*. *Journal of Social Work Education* 45 (3) pp 481-497.

Scourfield J, Rees A, Shardlow S, Zhang ML (2018) *A Profile of UK Doctoral Candidates in Social Work and Social Care*. *British Journal of Social Work* Vol 48, issue 8, Dec 2018 pp 2313-2331.

## How the Guide was written

Dr Luke Geoghegan wrote the Guide. The draft Guide was then reviewed by five people who had either recently completed a doctorate in social work or had supervised doctoral students in social work or other subjects. The reviewers had studied at, or were working at, a range of universities. The reviewers 'fact checked' the draft and made suggestions for improvement. Changes were then made to the draft to reflect their comments and corrections.

BASW is grateful to those who reviewed the Guide:

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- Dr Philip Heslop
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- Dr Paul Shuttleworth
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BASW welcomes any feedback on the Guide for potential incorporation in future editions. Contact us at [policyadmin@basw.co.uk](mailto:policyadmin@basw.co.uk)

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