

So you're thinking about doing a PhD?

NIHR CLAHRC East Midlands is an applied research unit that works across the Universities and Health and Social Care sector in the East Midlands:

<http://www.clahrc-em.nihr.ac.uk>. As part of our work, we have a responsibility to increase research capacity, and as such, we fund a number of PhD studentships to support the development of clinical and non-clinical academics.

As the CLAHRC's Training Lead, I spend a lot of time talking to potential PhD students about what doing a PhD is like, and I thought it was about time to share some of the concerns and issues that come up repeatedly. You can also find some useful advice here: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/what-phd-advice-phd-students>.

What follows includes some very honest, personal reflections from NIHR CLAHRC East Midlands' students and supervisors, based on their experiences of doing and supervising PhDs. I hope that this helpful, neutral advice will be useful for you in making an informed decision about whether or not to apply to undertake doctoral level study.

If you'd like to talk to someone about this decision, or to find out more about our PhD funding opportunities, then please get in touch: Emma.Rowley@nottingham.ac.uk

A PhD is an academic qualification that helps you to become an independent researcher. It's a long, dedicated, sometimes arduous and challenging period of self-directed study. It can also be a fun and incredibly rewarding experience. A PhD is based on a critical and inquiring approach, and results in an academic, highly rigorous piece of research, written into a 100,000 word long thesis.



A full time PhD lasts for 3 years; recent guidance from the ESRC¹ suggests that the minimum annual requirement for PhD level work is 18,000 hours (which equates to 37.5 hours a week on a 48 week working year). However, most people that have done or are doing a PhD will tell you that there are times when you'll need to spend

¹ <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/files/skills-and-careers/studentships/postgraduate-funding-guide/>

far longer than this on it, and that actually, you never really leave your PhD alone – it lives with you. Doing a PhD isn't a 9-5 job, it's a personal endeavour.

Doing a PhD isn't the same as studying for an Undergraduate or Masters-level degree; it's also not the same as being a Research Assistant or having done some research as part of a clinical role.



Thinking about applying for and undertaking a PhD is a big decision; it's not something to be entered into lightly, but should be an informed choice that you discuss with your family, friends and colleagues, as well as with the academic research supervisors that you hope to work with, and with your employers if you're going to request a change to your contracted hours or working arrangements.

Before you get much further with your decision / application, ask yourself:

- Why do you want to do a PhD?
- Do you actually want to do a PhD?
- What will having a PhD do for you verses not having one?
- Are you able to commit to doing a PhD?



Why do a PhD?

“As a highly experienced therapist, I decided to undertake academic study to improve my clinical practice and develop my career potential. Soon, my PhD will be complete, and my next step is to gain a position where I can enthuse and lead others who like me, can see research questions emerging from the clinical ‘pit face’”.

What is a PhD?

A PhD is an academic qualification, and is seen as a ‘rite of passage’ or an ‘academic apprenticeship’ that opens doors into the academic world, and increasingly, into clinical academic roles that combine both clinical practice and academic scholarship.

A PhD enables you to acquire and develop advanced research skills, and to apply these skills to a particular topic or set of debates, thus demonstrating academic scholarship. These skills are concerned with different research traditions and methods, including specialist quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as skills associated with thinking and writing conceptually, analytically and theoretically.

A PhD needs to explore something new (original) or at least something not already well established. Finding something new (also referred to as “the gap in the literature”) can be difficult, and so a PhD can also challenge something that is well-established if there is a reasonable basis for this, and new knowledge is expected to be developed.



A PhD is a Hansel and Gretel exercise of finding a pathway through a complex area of work in a systematic way. The writing of the PhD needs to convey the reader from the background, through the aims and methods, results, discussion and conclusions as a rational and coherent exercise. This is why the PhD is so valued – at the end of the PhD, the student can independently and systematically find their way through a complex field of knowledge in a way that someone else reasonably informed in the field can understand.

“A PhD is like looking at a postage stamp with a magnifying glass. You focus on one very, very small thing in immense detail. You have a very clear objective about your area of research and by the end you will be the expert in that area. Overall doing a PhD is all consuming, it permeates through all aspects of your life. It isn’t like working, you don’t get to put it down at the end of the day. It is always there in your head”.

A PhD is more than a ‘project’ - and it’s certainly not a taught course. Rather, a PhD is an independent, personal, intensive, rewarding and challenging journey. Doing a PhD means signing up for a very intense, literature heavy and self-directed period of study. It requires a lot of time and effort, and it requires a high level of academic ability. It’s an opportunity to contribute to knowledge through developing novel empirical, conceptual, methodological, and/or theoretical insights. Although this probably sounds daunting, a PhD doesn’t have to be world-changing/worthy of a

Nobel Prize. Most PhDs make a modest, mainstream contribution to an established academic field.



“When I’m not writing/reading/collecting data/or doing admin I’m thinking about my study, I’m finding it all consuming! A PhD is loads of reading, loads of writing and loads of thinking. Allow yourself time to read. Do not view it as a waste of your time, give yourself time to digest it and determine how it can be related to your own study”.

A PhD is an opportunity to really explore your area of interest in real depth, practice your research skills and develop new arguments of your own. Students are often challenged to think about new ways of thinking about the world, and about themselves as researchers. A really frequent question for clinical-academic PhD students is ‘are you a clinician or an academic?’ All students are pushed and questioned about their understanding of advanced theories and debates in order for them establish ‘the state of the art’ - to find the gap in the literature that their new or original work addresses - and importantly to use their work to fill this gap and advance science.

“A PhD to me is the opportunity of a lifetime. Learning how to unpack ideas, discussion and concepts not only changes you career wise, but also as a person. It’s a chance to work with individuals who are completely inspiring and incredibly influential in their field – it’s a unique experience”.

A PhD is an intense experience. It requires a sense of self-direction with continuous efforts to produce an original, highly rigorous academic and independent research. The net result is a 100,000 word thesis, but along the way, there are numerous other elements that are learned.



“A PhD is a three year visit to the wildest theme park that you can imagine with moments of elation, angst, and confusion! It is not something that should be undertaken lightly, but if you are the right person, the net result is a deep satisfaction that you are doing something enjoyable and worthwhile”.

What a PhD isn't



A PhD is not a taught course (although you might have to take some modules and do some assignments in addition to your core PhD work). Rather, it is a period of independent, self-directed and self-managed study, which can be strange when coming from a 'regular' job or from a taught course where your days are already planned out by someone else.

A PhD almost certainly won't directly improve patient care; embarking on a PhD to 'prove' that the service that you provide is great/should be better funded/expanded etc. is usually a bad idea, and often leads to disappointment.

A PhD is not a giant dissertation – there is a requirement for originality (addressing that gap in the literature), and for fully worked up, argued and defended methodological and theoretical positions.

A PhD isn't something someone else is going to do for you (including your supervisors); it's your work, your study, your data...!

Entry criteria. What qualifications do you need to do a PhD?

As a basic rule, you need at least a 2.1 at undergraduate degree (but there is sometimes some flexibility in this...) in order to be eligible to apply for doctoral study. Some Universities also ask that you have a Masters degree.



Take a look at the entry criteria for the University you want to be based at, as the entry requirements are dependent upon the University and Department that you do your PhD in. CLAHRC East Midlands only funds PhD studentships that are based at one of the Universities in the East Midlands.

- University of Derby: <http://www.derby.ac.uk/research/degrees/apply/entry/>
- University of Leicester: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/research-degrees/how-to-apply/academic-requirements/academic-requirements>
- Leicester de Montfort: <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/graduate-school/enquiries-and-applications/how-to-apply.aspx>
- University of Lincoln: <https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/studyatlincoln/postgraduateprogrammes/>

- University of Loughborough:
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/getting-started/apply/research-application/>
- University of Northampton: <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/study/how-to-apply/research-degrees/>
- University of Nottingham: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pgstudy/how-to-apply/research.aspx>
- Nottingham Trent University:
https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/research/ntu_doctoral_school/applying_fees_funding/index.html

Do you need research experience or previous research training before you do a PhD?

CLAHRC has funded PhD researchers who haven't had any previous research training (such as a Masters in Research Methods), although most of our students have either completed a Masters or have significant research experience prior to commencing their studies. It's highly unlikely we'd ever fund someone who hadn't ever done any research...

"I personally have come straight from BSc, to MSc, to PhD. Each one has been a big leap to a higher level of academia, but a PhD requires different kinds of skills alongside this. You are effectively training yourself to be a researcher, you have to learn to establish yourself, have confidence in your abilities (no matter how unconfident you feel!) and stay motivated to do the work you need to do".

What is the time commitment?



A PhD is not a Monday to Friday 9-5 job.

"It's not just time spent sitting at the computer, but also time thinking about stuff in the car or when I'm out running etc. I read papers in bed before I go to sleep/when I'm waiting for the kids at swimming etc. and I work during the weekends too...it's always on my mind!"

A PhD is expected to be a thesis about 3 years of full time work; not 4 or more years. It's more than a full-time job and should be treated as such. Working in the evenings and weekends is common for most PhD students. It will involve, at some point, making sacrifices in the rest of your life. However, it does occasionally offer some flexibility.

“A PhD far exceeds 37 hours per week. It cannot in any sense be classified as a regular Monday to Friday, 9-5 job. I have a family, and although the programme allows massive flexibility where I can attend events such as parents evening, it also means that I work every evening and every Saturday morning, and have had to give up voluntary roles. I am constantly reading”.

A PhD is a significant undertaking and commitment of time, energy and emotion - 'blood, sweat and tears'. It's certainly not an easy ride. It's hard, but it's possible.

A PhD can be studied part-time, over 5-6 years, however, even then, PhDs remain a full-time commitment.

A PhD needs to be managed; having a working routine helps.



“You need to be really organised. Work out when and where you work best and use that to your advantage. Identify what you need to do to complete a task and work out how you will do it. Set time lines for completing tasks. Don't sit at home in isolation all the time or equally don't sit staring at the computer screen in the department if it is too noisy for you to be able to complete a particular task”.

How do I select my topic?

A PhD is an enormous investment in time and at times you will lose hope – you really need to care about the topic you're studying and researching. Ask yourself: will it get me out of bed in the morning? Will I still be interested in it even when I are thoroughly fed up with it (because you will get fed up with it)?



You never really switch off from doing a PhD, and three years is a long time. Make sure you are passionate about your PhD. You will need that passion to get you through the difficult periods.

If you can, choose your own topic (although often there will be restrictions around the topic because of the constraints of the funding you have been awarded). For example, our PhD funding has to meet the CLAHRCs objectives and programme of work: <http://www.clahrc-em.nihr.ac.uk/about/what-is-clahrc-em.aspx> as well as Health Education England's Mandate: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hee-mandate-2016-to-2017>.

Working with your supervisors

Make sure you have the right supervisors for you. Choosing supervisors who you can work with is much more important than whether they are 'big names'. Ask yourself: Is it their field of work? Will they give you the time and resources that you need? Is their personal and supervision style supportive?

“Research your potential supervisors and talk to other students being supervised by them before you start or agree to anything. As a supervisor, I do not want to waste my time either and would never be offended if people approached me and then decided that they could not do it or there was a better supervisor”.



Every PhD student has at least 2 academic supervisors. Some are lucky enough to have a third. Group supervision can be useful to balance different views. For students embarking on a clinical academic PhD, we ask for 2 academic supervisors and 1 clinical supervisor, to ensure that all parts of their clinical academic development are covered.

“Supervisors are your critical friends. Each supervisor brings highly useful insights which are based upon their experiences and you have to take what you can from each. It has been difficult to accept frequent criticism from

people who are very similar in age. However, the PhD programme is unique and the highest level of academia, therefore it has to be borne”.

You need to actively manage the relationship with your supervisors, including how you plan and work together in your supervision sessions. Remember, it’s your PhD and your work, not theirs!



“I have amazing supervisors who are incredibly supportive, offer constructive feedback and guide me and challenge me in my approach. This is all done within a very supportive environment. I have the most contact with my primary supervisor; officially you can expect 10 supervision sessions a year (as a full time student) but we meet on average just more than once a month – though this is flexible. Every supervisor is different. I look forward to supervision. I spend a lot of time preparing for each session and I think this is really important. If I have a problem with something I never present them with just the issue. I always offer some solutions too, together we can work out how to overcome things. It is not a one way dialogue or communication and we actively discuss issues around the project and the wider areas”.

“I’m totally inspired by my supervisors, and I could sit and chat to them for hours (not even about work related bits!) They are what I aspire to be. We seem to have the balance just right, they critique and guide my study and writing, sometimes strongly, but not in a way that makes me feel really rubbish – just in a constructive and encouraging way”.

Your supervisors will not hold your hand through the PhD; they are there to guide you and to ensure that you are on the right track. The rest is up to you.

“Establish early goals and commitments. I asked my supervisors on day one what they expected from me in terms of communication, relating to email, problems, personal, general project stuff etc. This was a really useful thing to do as we established from the beginning what we could expect from each other”.



You should expect your supervisors to read your work prior to meetings (although that may not always happen) and you should agree at the start of your PhD how long in advance of your supervision meeting you will send them your work.

You should expect your supervisors to guide you, but ultimately the direction of your PhD is your decision. It's your PhD after all!

The supervisory relationship is not like a 'teacher-pupil' one as the supervisors will not necessarily take the lead; to get the most out of it, the student has to direct the relationship.

“You have to realise that your supervisors are not that interested in your PhD really: it's your PhD. They may have lots of students and certainly have lots of other things to do, so probably only spend the time in supervision sessions thinking about you and your work. They are very knowledgeable though and they have seen lots of students go through this process before so can offer good advice”.

Make an informed decision



Get your head around the size and scope of doing a PhD.

Some people underestimate what is involved; for most people, a PhD will probably be the biggest thing they have ever done. You need to be realistic about how a PhD might fit with other commitments you may have.

Choose wisely. A PhD isn't just about the topic, the research, the end qualification or the skills learnt. It's also very much influenced by where and who you study with. Get to know the department that you want to be based in. Chat to existing students and find out what it is really like to study there. If you are successful with your application and are funded by the CLAHRC, it's most likely that you'll spend the majority of your time within your own department rather than with the CLAHRC researchers.

“I spent quite a lot of time researching PhD's before I applied. I contacted the department and identified a potential supervisor, came to visit and even chatted to the existing students about life as a PhD student to find out about the pressures and demands of doing a PhD. This was definitely helpful as it gave me a good understanding”.

Working independently

Doing a PhD means working on your own – which has positives and negatives!

“You have to keep yourself motivated, as no one else will be doing it for you, but each time you overcome a new hurdle, you get a massive sense of achievement as you did that all by yourself. Sometimes you feel a bit lost and I find in that case it’s always best to talk to someone, be it your peers or your supervisor”.

PhDs can be isolating, but they don’t need to be. You need to find the way of working that works best for you – and this may change over time.

“Make time to build up some form of support network within the PhD community as otherwise you have nobody to bounce ideas off or discuss issues with as nobody else really understands what you are doing or what the challenges are. I think you have to come to terms with that fact that it’s nobody else’s PhD but your own and only you can drive it forward. You are given direction, but you have to decide how to move forward with things. I like the flexibility that working independently offers me, but I also have a small number of really great supportive people who are invaluable at times”.



Don’t overlook the support that you can get (and will need) from your peers. PhD students rely on one another for support, advice and friendship. You can learn a lot just by having a coffee and chat with someone so make sure you make time for social interactions.



“Sitting in solitude is no good for everyone all of the time. We have a peer support group which meets once a month. This is a really useful forum. I started my PhD on the same date as 5 others so we have developed a tight close network with each other. Over time you get to know other people at various stages of the PhD, for example, at a

journal club, a protocol planning session and special interest methodology groups”.

Work/life balance

PhDs can easily become all too consuming, where every-day normal activities are forgotten or ignored. Ask yourself, do you have the time and personal resources to make such a commitment?

Talk to students who have nearly completed or completed a PhD as well as your managers, and potential supervisors just to make sure before you commit yourself. Whilst it's important to dedicate time for a PhD, it is also possible to have a life outside of a PhD.

Several of our students continue to work clinically, and have families and other responsibilities.



“I have a large commute to get to my university, two school age children and a long term chronic health condition. Sometimes it can be tough to get a balance but it does vary. I find that I am forced to put the PhD down as my family need me. Yes it can be frustrating when you are half way through what you think is an amazing piece of work and you want to keep going but it's nearly time to collect the kids from school so you have to leave. However I find those moments usually very useful. The family makes me have that balance. Some of my big break through moments have been during my commute or whilst waiting for an after school club to finish. Also I can talk through elements of my research with my husband (who is not an academic) which really helps as he offers a different perspective. My children too are interested in what I am doing, I also think it is good for them to see me studying too. We all do our homework together!”

A PhD is really a juggling act. It can be flexible (at times), but there will also be occasions when it can feel too overwhelming with competing demands.

“A positive bonus of the PhD is that I can juggle things nicely in terms of work/life balance, but it takes a lot of discipline and understanding from the family. I have two teenage children who do understand, and dare I say actually respect what I am doing (which serves as a form of role model). My

wife also understands, but has told me that she will divorce me if I ever consider anything like this again!"

What is it like being a CLAHRC PhD student? What are the added benefits?

Being linked to the CLAHRC is an 'added extra', something above the support you get from your supervisors, department or university.

"CLAHRC is a great organisation to be involved with, you get that much needed added support, and a chance meet and be in close contact with more senior researchers and staff members. You get to see how research can link into practice and understand how it all comes together".



"CLAHRC makes you feel like you belong somewhere. It's an additional source of support, resources and networking. And it's quite immediate in the sense that it is located here in the East Midlands, rather than other funders who might be in London etc. It's got much more of a personal feel than other funders too. Being part of the NIHR allows access to NIHR events and networking which are really valuable when thinking about developing a clinical academic career".

Being linked to the CLAHRC opens doors to new opportunities, including external links to the NIHR, Health Education England and regional health and social care organisations; links to other CLAHRCs; training; PPI groups and a budget to support PPI work; and to apply for travel bursaries to attend conferences.

"Having the support of CLAHRC is valuable and, apart from the obvious funding, I have accessed various developmental facilities. For example, I attended the annual NIHR Trainee conference which allowed me to listen and talk with my peers alongside the ability to attend very appropriate and useful lectures. The second example was that of the 'Boot Camp' where we were put through our paces with a team that we had never met in the development of a communications strategy for a piece of research. The end result was

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Collaboration for Leadership in
Applied Health Research and Care

entry into the 'Dragons Den'. All of these have allowed me to develop personally, emotionally, and academically”.

“I was fortunate enough to be awarded a CLAHRC travel prize which allowed me to attend a conference – and whilst I was at conferences that I realised the wider power of the CLAHRC as a whole. There are 13 CLAHRCs across England. People came to talk to me at the conference because they, like me were CLAHRC researchers. It’s a great networking tool and to a certain degree feels like being part of a little club. I have met some great researchers and been offered some excellent advice from other CLAHRC people which I am convinced would not have happened if the link hadn’t been there”.



Attend your theme meetings (each of the 5 CLAHRC themes has regular theme meetings) and interact with the other researchers in your network. Get to know the other projects that are taking place, as it is likely that they may be able to help you in your thinking.



“CLAHRC also have a dedicated role for PhD students so if you are experiencing difficulties you can approach them and they can help guide you through. I guess I think of this as an independent friend. I have never had to use this but it is reassuring to know that the structure exists”.

“The CLAHRC PhD Lead assists with all kinds on quandaries, from trivial to more significant. Without this support, the PhD would be (much) harder”.

In CLAHRC we’re also lucky that we work closely with the NIHR Clinical Academic Career Advocates based in the region who represent the Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy professions, and who are always happy to support people in developing their clinical academic role and identity: <http://www.nihr.ac.uk/our->

[faculty/trainees/support-and-resources-for-trainees/support-for-trainees-in-nihr-infrastructure/training-advocates/contact-us/](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/about/faculty/trainees/support-and-resources-for-trainees/support-for-trainees-in-nihr-infrastructure/training-advocates/contact-us/)

Balancing clinical and academic demands

Clinicians choosing to do a PhD face an additional challenge – balancing clinical demands with the PhD workload.



“I have a clinical role where I can be quite flexible and so I have been able to organise PhD work around 'proper' work and vice versa (particularly in the case of data collection when clinical work had to fit round data collection opportunities). I didn't need to make any arrangements. I just agreed with my manager that I would reduce my hours to 2 days per week, but promised to deliver the same service that I had previously and they believed that I could do it, and I have! It's just meant working at pace and being very focused. The main thing is that I made arrangements that I wanted. I wasn't forced into doing anything I didn't want to do by my clinical area. And I really love my clinical role. That makes a huge difference. Work have been very supportive in a hands off 'do whatever you want, but keep the clinical service going' kind of way”.

CLAHRC doesn't get involved in any negotiations around clinical release or the employment contracts on behalf of the student – you need to do this yourself. Our students have all negotiated different arrangements that work for them

“My clinical role is very flexible so I can work around the PhD to some extent. Clinical demands always exceed the time you have to meet them though, so you do have to be strict about giving enough time to the PhD. Most people outside of the PhD (clinical managers included) usually see time working on the PhD as time off, so can expect you do more clinical work in that time, but you have to be strict in saying



that it is not time which the clinical area can use. You are fully occupied working on your PhD. You have to feel a responsibility to your funder to give sufficient time to the PhD as they are paying you to do it in the same way that your clinical area are paying you”.

We ask all of our PhD applicants to have secured their manager’s / organisation’s approval prior to making their funding application.



“I was very fortunate from a clinical perspective, as I had an extremely supportive line manager, in addition to ‘big wigs’ who wanted, and still want, the clinical academic role to be a success. These individuals were really significant when it came to practical arrangements (e.g. authorising support, and arranging contracts), and it simply wouldn’t of been a reality without them”.

“I am contracted to provide 0.2 whole time equivalent of clinical time. This is where the complexity lies and it depends upon the role. If you hold a clinic, you can still hold these on one day per week. In my case, I provide community based rehabilitation and one day per week doesn’t work.

Therefore, I fulfil clinical blocks; I have just completed a three month block at three days per week. This is my clinical commitment fulfilled for the year, but it also means that my patients have to be managed and the research slows down. This initially resulted in several meetings with my principal academic supervisor and clinical manager, where potential issues were discussed”.

Committing to PhD study means taking time away from the day job (although it is possible to do a small amount of clinical work to maintain your registration). It also means making a financial sacrifice as a PhD stipend doesn’t match salaries. We offer the same stipend as the leading PhD funders in the UK². It might be that your employer is able to offer some additional funding to support your career development. CLAHRC also doesn’t cover research costs, so you’d need to discuss how these would be covered with your supervisory team, as part of your application and protocol development discussions.

² <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/skills/training/>

The end goal

Be honest, why do you want to do a PhD? Is it about career progression, a personal challenge, or something else? What difference will having a PhD make to you?

Everyone's reasons for doing a PhD are different.

"The research I'm doing will hopefully open doors to future research that I could be a part of. I'd love to start training to become a clinical psychologist. I think it's both important to have goals or 'plans' of what to do in your future, but also to remain open to a couple of different paths, as you never know what will happen".

"My very clear goal is to become a clinical academic who works clinically part time, and leads, inspires, and enthuses others to get involved in research that comes from the clinician's questions".



"I hope that the PhD will give me some legitimacy moving forward in the sense that it is a qualification which denotes a certain level of academic skill. It is necessary to open some doors within the Clinical Academic Career pathway. My goal is to have a clinical academic career, but what that looks like is unclear. I can see how the clinical part might work, but I'm not certain about the academic part just at the moment. It is a work in progress!"

"My goal is to be a stroke researcher, and so my PhD is based with the largest stroke research group in the country. I hope to be in position to apply for a post-doctoral position in my Division once I have submitted my PhD. My longer term goal would be to run my own research grants. I am using the PhD to gather the necessary skills so that I will be more successful in achieving this".

"A PhD is a stepping stone to better things and more opportunities hopefully. It's an opportunity to explore new experiences and have freedom to direct what I want to do and where my interests lie. It's a fabulous opportunity to find out who I am academically and have the freedom to explore that".

A PhD is, at the end of the day, an academic qualification. It can open doors and advance careers, but check, will it open the doors that you want to go through?

I wish I'd known then what I know now!

"I was somewhat naïve in my approach to the PhD application. I had heard from others that the programme was hard work, but know that I am actually a hard worker anyway. The programme is the hardest thing that I have ever done in my life (oh and I have parachuted, walked in the Andes, been to war (yes really!), and hold two masters degrees!)"



Hindsight is great. However, you don't often get to benefit from your own hindsight advice. If they could do it all over again, what would our students and staff tell themselves before they started their PhDs?

"Write every day, and write-up as you go along - thinking and writing critically are the essential skills of completing a PhD. Don't get it right, get it written!"

Do your research before you apply and choose the right Department and University for you.

"Be in the right place, for you. I didn't appreciate how different various schools are around the university and that the kind of PhD you will end up doing has to speak to the agenda school that you're in. It's not just about the supervisor, it's about the school and their expectations too. Being in the wrong place would be miserable".

Choose the right topic / focus for your research.

"Don't start a PhD about something you're not passionate about - there are times when you're stuck in a rut and only you can motivate yourself, if you don't love or care about your topic it'd be very difficult!"

Network and get support from your peers.

"Get out there, speak to other PhD students, they can be a big help for providing support and sharing their experiences, I've learnt a lot from talking to PhD students that are a few months or years ahead of me!"

Embrace the 'newness'!

“We work with many experienced clinicians and health services researchers who wish to learn about and apply advanced social and organisational theories. In practice, this often involves a rapid learning curve, as students need to quickly assimilate and apply foundational theories to find the cutting edge debates. For some, it can feel like learning a second language, but we are experienced in supporting students through this journey”.

“When I first started my PhD, I didn't know that I had to do a module in Philosophy (this will vary greatly between schools and universities). This delayed everything in my head and I had to learn about an entirely new, alien concept. It has ended up actually being really valuable and I now see why it was a requirement, but it was a bit of a shock at the start!”

“I've learnt how academics really value discussing ideas, networking, reading and, reflecting and learning from one another – this may sound obvious but this also took some getting used to as pre-PhD I saw work as something tangible, for example completing a clinical task, to writing a specific amount of words. This change and realisation was really significant to me, and still takes some getting used to!”

Expect change. Ideas develop over time.

“I didn't realise how much my PhD would change from what I thought I would be doing originally. That has been a nice surprise, but one that I didn't expect”.

Look after yourself.

“Be true and good to yourself. To undertake PhD level training is very arduous and there are times where the days are very dark and isolating, the converse also applies, but during these times you need to look after yourself. Allow yourself time out to stay fit and healthy. Make sure that you link up with your peers who actually are on the same emotional rollercoaster ride!”

“Nothing is impossible. If you have this dream that you want to pursue then you can make it work. I am a mature student with a complicated life. We all have life related issues going on in the background yet we all manage to get through and we all love our research too. Going through the PhD journey with colleagues who are supportive really helps”.

“You can do a PhD and still have children, pets, and hobbies and remain sane”.

Once you’ve started your PhD...

- Meet up with other PhD students; it’s all about peer support.
- Don’t forget the support and opportunities that CLAHRC can offer, including money for PPI activities, travel / research costs bursaries and invitations to NIHR trainee events.
- Be honest with your supervisors; if you’re having a tough time, tell them before things get worse. They can help you to find a way forward.
- Read this, and try to follow the advice offered:
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/nine-things-all-phd-students-should-do-least-once>

With thanks to those who contributed their experiences and advice.

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