Applying for a PhD/MPhil in Psychiatry, Cambridge - a practical guide

Note: This has been written for a PhD application but is also relevant for an MPhil application.

So you have decided to apply for this programme - terrific!

Getting into the MPhil/PhD programme is a combination of:

- Good prior experience, grades, and recommendation
- A good fit with the research group/team
- A good research proposal

There are also a whole host of external factors that are not in your control. For example, a research group may not have any space to take on new team members, or they may already have enough team members working on one line of research, or they may have shifted focus in terms of their research direction. But don't worry about things that are not in your control!

Step 1: Understand if you are eligible

Have a look at https://www.psychiatry.cam.ac.uk/students/prospective/prospective-graduates/ and How to Apply - Department of Psychiatry (cam.ac.uk) to see if you are eligible and understand the process.

Step 2: Contact your potential supervisor

Your next step is to email a potential supervisor, send them your CV and briefly summarise your background and why you are interested in pursuing this research degree in their group. This can draw up on your previous research experience and should be in line with some of the research the potential supervisor is working on. Do this early, ideally in summer (June - September). Remember, academics are typically busy folks, and may be away in summer, so give yourself plenty of time. If they haven't responded to you in two weeks after your first email, send them a reminder. Often emails get lost in their inbox. You can send them a few more reminders.

Step 3: Write a research proposal

If interested, your potential supervisor will ask you to send a research proposal. Don't panic!

You can ask the potential supervisor if you can get in touch with any current members of the group to understand what questions they are working on. This can help you contextualise your research question and understand what working with the team is like. It will also help you decide whether you really want to do a PhD in that group. Remember, it's three years of your life and you want to work with a group that you think will enjoy. Feel free to ask questions about supervision style, how often people meet, the group dynamics, how social the team is, if other PhD/MPhil students feel supported.

Writing a PhD research proposal: A typical research proposal is about 2 - 3 pages long or approximately 2,000 words. The research proposal and the quality of it will be an important factor used in the university's decision to accept you onto a PhD programme. A good research proposal will need to demonstrate that you are capable of thinking critically and

independently, and that you can communicate your ideas clearly. It should consist of the following:

1. A clear working title for your research project that summarises the research question
2. An aim (can include a few sub aims) that clearly defines the questions that you hope to address during your PhD.
3. An introduction that clearly sets out the context for your question. A good introduction will briefly summarise what we have known so far, what the gaps are, and how your research question addressed the gaps. The last paragraph in your introduction can be used to address why your research question is important, realistic, and relevant - how would your research add value to the field?
4. A methods section that will describe the datasets, the statistical analyses, softwares, and technique that you would use to address your aims. Often, a good proposal has reasonably detailed methods - think of it as a framework of different experiments that you want to conduct to address your question.
5. A paragraph on limitations that thinks through what some of the limitations of your methods are in trying to address your question.
6. A feasibility section, typically about a paragraph or two long, that addresses the question of how feasible your study is, what research funding (broadly) this may need, and the expected timeline. Typically, a timeline is provided using a Gantt chart.
7. References

A good research proposal should not be complicated. However, it can be challenging to write and it is important to get right. A PhD is challenging, so it is good training working on your research proposal. Remember that it is meant to be an accurate overview, not a thesis, so you need to provide enough detail for the reader to understand it. Your proposal should be:

> CLEAR: is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated? Does it make sense, or is it vague and confusing?
> CONCISE: have you written your proposal in a succinct and focussed way?
> COHERENT: does your proposal link together well so that it tells the reader a short story about what you want to do, why you want to do it and how you will do it?

Step 4: Application and possible interview

Once you have submitted your proposal, your potential supervisor will indicate if they wish to take your proposal forward. If they do, they will ask you to submit a full application. They may also give you comments on your proposal that you can incorporate into your application. You can find how to apply here: How do I apply? | Postgraduate Admissions (cam.ac.uk).

Make a careful note of your funding options. It's highly advisable to apply to every funding that you're eligible for. Further, make sure you mention any contextual factors and how it has affected your performance in your application. This will help us take these into account whilst evaluating your application. Make sure you submit an application (and your referees submit their testimonials) before the funding deadline, which is typically in early December (sometime as early as December 1st).

Once you have submitted your application, the department may decide to take your application forward and invite you for an interview. An interview will typically be about 1

hour or so and will include your potential supervisor and one or two other academics who are experts in the area that you propose to conduct your research in. You may also be asked to complete a task or two prior to the interview to assess your research skills and your ability to think independently and critically. Most interviews will happen in December/January.

Your application (including your interview) will be judged on the following parameters:

- Academic results, including any contextual factors that may have affected your academic results
- Your referees testimony. Your referees will also be asked to comment on your suitability for the programme, how well you performed relative to your classmates, and if there were any contextual factors that affected your performance.
- Your knowledge of the field. This includes whether you have suitable relevant courses for the proposed research programme, how well you are aware of recent advances in the field, and how you may apply your knowledge to address questions in the field.
- Independence in thought and ability to critically evaluate evidence. This may be assessed either during the interview or using a task that you have been asked to complete.

Step 5: Outcome and next steps

None of the stages above is a guarantee that you will get in. However, after the interview, you will know your final outcome. The department, followed by the University will either accept your application (conditionally or unconditionally) or sadly decline your application. If you have received an acceptance, then you will be asked to provide certain documents to meet your offer conditions. An acceptance by the University is not a guarantee of funding. Funding decisions are independent of this, and are typically provided from February to July of the year.