

What you can expect from studying for a Doctoral level degree at King's College, London

1. Studying for a doctorate in the UK

Educational research often tells us that students considering studying for a doctoral level degree in the UK do not always understand what this involves, and what benefits they might derive from it. The purpose of this document is to describe the nature of the UK doctorate and the learning styles that it requires, and also to specify what you can expect as a doctoral student at King's College London, a research-intensive University located in the heart of one of the world's great cities.

Many students find that studying in the UK is in some ways quite different from their previous experience. One of the purposes of UK higher education is to develop your ability to work independently on complex tasks, since this will be very useful to you in your future life. We aim over the course of your programme to reduce reliance on being directly taught. Our emphasis is far more on students learning – and learning to learn – rather than being taught. This is a key difference. You may still have lectures and smaller group activities, and learning resources of many kinds will be available to you, but you will be expected to work independently for significant periods of time.

UK higher education also aims to encourage critical thinking. You are expected to challenge ideas and not to take them for granted. This can seem unusual for students who are not used to questioning teachers and supervisors. However, if you are to be a critical thinker, you have to be able to develop your own perspective, always supported, of course, by the best available evidence. So academic debate is encouraged, and you should not feel that it may damage your relationship with your teacher or supervisor.

You will probably find that the academic level at which you are studying will make a difference to what is expected. In the UK system, we aim that, at the end of a PhD, the student will be working at a level that is equal to that of the supervisor. Indeed the PhD itself is a recognition by a scholarly community that you have achieved that level. You should view higher education in the UK as a journey towards that point, and should expect that independence in learning and critical thinking will be increasingly present at higher levels of study.

2. The nature of Doctoral awards in the UK

In the UK doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge or its application, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems

- A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced enquiry

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- Make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- Continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches

And holders will have:

The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

3. The Nature of the King's Doctorate

King's is a research-intensive university that prides itself on being one of the world's top 25 universities, and which attracts students and staff because of its research excellence. In the last government assessment of research quality, 60% of our research was categorised as 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent' and 91% of our research was rated as 'internationally recognised'. King's is also located in London, a global city that hosts a high density of academic, business and cultural excellence.

The next section sketches out what is the added value that students normally gain from studying at a research-intensive University such as King's. It should be read in conjunction with the generics described in the section above, which are already delivered by the College's doctoral programmes.

Our core objective

The main aim of doctoral programmes at King's is to help students fulfil their full potential and become critical and creative independent thinkers, well-versed in the latest methods and ideas in their discipline, capable of publishing their findings in a peer-reviewed journal, and employable within or outside a University. Our policies and practices flow from this core objective.

Generation of Knowledge

Students should acquire the ability to make an original contribution to knowledge, i.e. the discovery of new knowledge or the application of existing knowledge in new situations, the connection of previously unrelated facts, the development of new theory or the revision of previously held views.

They will also be capable of producing a thesis that contains material publishable in a peer-review journal or as a research monograph, or be an original musical composition, original literary text or original performance.

Student capabilities

The student should be able to show evidence of the following:

Awareness of existing knowledge

- Awareness of the current state of knowledge in the specialist field.
- Ability to locate the research problem within contemporary knowledge.

Research Skills

An ability to:

- source, synthesise, analyse and review critically contemporary knowledge about a given topic.
- define a feasible and significant research problem.
- develop and sustain an argument across the length of the thesis.
- write clearly and persuasively.
- structure material into a logical narrative with appropriate chapters and sections.
- accurately to précis the material of others and reference it.
- identify and justify the choice of appropriate methods to address the research problem.
- analyse the evidence that has been generated by the research, in the context of the argument being presented.
- derive conclusions that are appropriate to the research project.
- demonstrate a high degree of specialist research skill in the subject of the project.

Generic and Transferable skills

These will be acquired from a range of sources including the supervisor, the Department, the School, and from attending events outside the College.

The Graduate School also delivers an integrated training programme (the 'Researcher Development Programme' or RDP) that will facilitate critical independent enquiry, develop research skills and autonomy, and instil generic and transferable skills as part of a Personal Development Plan. This programme is of a high quality and delivered via a range of media to suit students wishing to study in different places and at different times.

The RDP will equip students to:

- Understand and be aware of the research environment.
- Effectively manage a research project (measured through the ability to conduct the complete project in four years).
- Acquire personal effectiveness– the ability to manage oneself and work effectively with others.

- Communicate - ability to write clearly, argue persuasively, and present research work to a specialist or lay audience in the form of written or oral presentations.
- Network and work as part of team.
- Manage their careers.

The RDP also makes available:

- Opportunities to suggest and develop bespoke generic training opportunities through the 'Roberts Open Competition'.
- Opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills through King's Business and Business Competitions.
- Opportunities for individual coaching

Supervision

Being supervised by a researcher at King's will offer:

- Regular supervision by one or more international research leaders.
- Supervision by supervisors who have been given the opportunity regularly to reflect on their supervisory practice.
- Supervision by supervisors who know that their efforts will be recognised and rewarded through initiatives such as the Supervisory Excellence Awards and through inclusion of assessment of supervision in annual staff appraisal and all academic promotions.
- Supervision in an environment that has led, in the past, to a high proportion of students submitting within 4 years.
- Opportunities to learn the latest research techniques/ideas.
- Mentoring by a leading academic who can provide opportunities to acquire the skills necessary to become an academic researcher or teacher.
- Access to research methods training within Schools appropriate to the research problem being investigated.

Examination

You will be prepared for the examination of your thesis, both by your supervisor and by training courses provided by the Graduate School Researcher Development Programme.

- The examination will be rigorous and will be undertaken by two researchers who are acknowledged leaders in their fields.

The national PRES survey tells us that King's students recorded higher satisfaction scores than those in comparable Universities for the timeliness of the examination of the thesis, its fairness and how they were prepared for the examination.

Connectivity and research culture

Becoming a leading researcher in your field will require you to network with a range of research communities, some inside your School or Division, some inside the College, and some within the wider academic community. We try to facilitate this by:

- A comprehensive induction programme that ensures all students are aware of the resources, facilities and support to which they are entitled and how to access this.

- Connection to a community of equally-talented students studying similar research topics, who can provide informal support and stimulation i.e. critical mass.
- Connection to a group of academic researchers who are leaders in their fields and who sustain a vibrant and active research culture. This should include research seminars, journal or reading groups, and methods workshops (where appropriate).
- Opportunities and funding to spend short study periods at other world class Universities with which we have partnerships.
- Opportunities and funding to deliver papers at research conferences
- Opportunities to publish research findings in peer-reviewed journals either through co-authorship with established researchers or mentoring by them.
- Experience of the process of drafting a grant application.
- Experience of the process of reviewing a grant application.
- Experience of how to referee a journal article/book chapter/book proposal.
- Opportunities to network with leading researchers outside King's.
- Graduate School events and facilities that encourage social and academic networking of postgraduates from different disciplines/Schools.
- Opportunities to connect to a large and influential group of alumni and be mentored by them.
- Opportunities to use world class libraries in London eg University of London library, British library.
- Other connections to the immediate environment e.g. cultural, legal and business centres in London and the City.
- Opportunities to network with postgraduates from other disciplines and institutions eg through Vitae events or events organised by Cumberland Lodge

Facilities and support

In order to excel at research you need access to academic and non-academic support and appropriate facilities. We aim to deliver this through;

- Opportunities to attend thorough and comprehensive Induction events organised by the Graduate School and academic Schools that will clearly state the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and students and signpost key support facilities and providers.
- Opportunities to learn how to teach at University level either through School-level training or through courses delivered by King's Learning Institute (as part of the Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice or outside this framework).
- Access to state-of-the-art specialist laboratories, experimental equipment, or library collections either at King's or through being able to travel to collaborating institutions.
- Access to English language support and tuition provided by the English Language Centre, where this is needed.
- Access to writing support from professional writers via the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows.
- Opportunities to acquire specialist careers advice either through one-to-one consultations with a specialist Postgraduate Careers Advisor or through courses.

- Opportunities to learn a modern foreign language through intensive assessed courses delivered by the Modern Language Centre.
- School/departmental workspace and conditions that are conducive to the production of high quality research.
- Access to Graduate School events designed to assist social and academic networking and create a community of learners
- Access to dedicated facilities for postgraduates eg the Graduate Lounges and the Graduate Zones in libraries.
- Availability of student counsellors to assist with personal problems.

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