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MRC LID Studentships: Interview information

First of all, congratulations on making it to this stage! The good news is that at least two panels have reviewed your application and decided that you have done well enough to make it to the next stage of this scheme. This is an achievement in itself.

For some statistics on this:

- We received 268 applications for 2022-23 MRC LID Studentships.
- 198 applications were complete. (This means the application had both an MRC LID application form and a project proposal based on one of the projects advertised.)
- 154 of the 198 applications were deemed good enough for supervision. (This means that if the applicant had submitted the same information and project proposal via a standard unfunded application for research study to their primary institution they would likely have been made an offer of admission.)
- 26 applicants were selected for interview.
- Up to 9 studentships are available to award. Of these 9, the DTP will award up to 2 studentships to international (non-UK applicants) with the remainder being offered to UK applicants (3 are ring-fenced for UK students from ethnic minority backgrounds).

Preparing for a formal PhD funding interview can be both stressful and exciting. We hope that this information will help make this a little more straightforward.

FAQs

How will I find out if I have been shortlisted for interview?

MRC LID has a multi-stage application assessment process, including review and feedback from the proposed supervisory team and a separate review by at least two independent MRC LID board members. The MRC LID Board then meet and review applications as a panel to determine the final interview shortlist.

Once a shortlist has been decided, the MRC LID admin team contacts all applicants with the outcome. Those whose applications have been unsuccessful will be notified of this. Those whose applications have been successful will be sent individual emails advising that they have been shortlisted for interview, and inviting them to attend.

Why is the DTP conducting interviews?

Your application form and documents have already been assessed, and the information provided checked against a number of criteria (research proposal; academic qualifications and history; experience and skills; contextual information etc). You have been shortlisted for interview based on this information.

A PhD is not easy. You will need to be very clear about your reasons for wanting to do a doctorate and demonstrate an understanding of what a UK PhD entails. The interview is an opportunity for you to give further information to the Doctoral Training Programme (DTP)

interview panel about your motivation, commitment and potential for study at the doctoral level.

It might be quite useful to keep this in the back of your mind:

- A PhD is all about 3-4 years full-time equivalent (FTE) of in-depth independent research, so you'll need to show in your interview that you're dedicated enough to complete 4 years FTE of study both working independently and with the support of your supervisors and other students.
- Research requires you to be intellectually curious, with the capacity to conduct independent research and learning, patient and diligent, with an eye for detail, the ability to process complex concepts and reason analytically, and to be logical and methodical in your planning and analysis. These highly prized research skills are what academics are looking for.
- Remember that this is also your opportunity to find out more about the DTP programme and decide whether the 'fit' is right for you. You need to consider whether or not you could see yourself as a student in our cohort, working with your proposed supervisory team, and interacting with the other research students on a day-to-day basis for the next 4 years plus. This feeling of "fit" is tricky to quantify and difficult to explain. There will be many factors that contribute to whether a certain place or programme "clicks" or "feels right" – only you will know which combination of these things will make you happy. Listen to yourself.

Do I need to attend in person?

No. All interviews will be held via video call conferencing (Zoom). The Zoom invitation will be sent out to you in advance of the interview date by the MRC LID admin team.

The email invitation mentions reasonable adjustments. What does this mean? What can I ask for?

A 'reasonable adjustment' is a change that must be made to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to an applicant's disability when applying for a job. A reasonable adjustment could involve making changes to the ways things are done or making sure we provide information in an accessible format.

Here are some web pages that provide further information, which some applicants may find useful:

- [Scope Interview Adjustments](#)
- [Employment Autism Reasonable Adjustments for interviews and assessments](#)
- [Disability Awareness Standard Reasonable Adjustments for interviews](#)
- [Mind Reasonable Adjustments](#)
- [ACAS Reasonable Adjustments](#)

If you need special arrangements made so that you can attend for interview, please let the MRC LID administration team know as soon as you are contacted with your interview invitation email.

Further information about support at both institutions throughout the period of study can be found on the websites:

[SGUL Disability Information for Students](#)
[LSHTM Student Disability Support](#)

What should I wear to my interview?

The board does not expect applicants to wear a suit or other formal wear. Some applicants choose to wear something smart, as it helps them to get into an interview frame of mind.

Others choose to wear the sort of clothes they would wear everyday around university. We would like you to feel comfortable, so please feel free to wear whatever won't distract you from your interview. (That said, it probably isn't best to wear your pyjamas!)

It is likely that the interview panel will be dressed business casual (something like trousers and a shirt). Don't be concerned if you are dressed more formally than the interviewers – this is fairly common in UK higher education interviews.

Who will be on the panel?

The panel will be made up of 3-4 academics from the MRC LID Board. Usually, 2-3 panels are interviewing simultaneously on interview day.

We cannot tell you the names of the interviewers in advance. When the interview starts the members of the interview panel will introduce themselves to you. (You may want to ensure you have a pen and paper, or an open document, so that you can make a note of them – if this is important for you to remember.)

How long will my interview be?

The interview will take 25-30 minutes.

What format will it take?

The panel will introduce themselves. They will ask you to do your pre-prepared timed (5 minute) presentation on a piece of research you've previously been involved in. This will be followed up by questions on your presentation; your PhD proposal, and your career trajectory and training (including where the DTP fits within that).

In a great interview, the discussion will flow quite naturally between you and the panel. But the panel is aware that you are likely to be nervous so they will try to help with additional questions and hints along the way where they can.

As you present and answer questions some panellists will be writing or typing up notes. This will help them keep track of your answers, and what stands out from your interview. This is important as they will be interviewing different candidates over a very long and intense day, and want to remember each person's interview well.

What questions will I be asked during my interview?

Interviewers are looking at your ideas, attitudes and opinions; they are not looking at getting the "right answer". They will be looking for evidence of a strong interest in the subject as well as enthusiasm for it. The panel will also be assessing your communication skills, your suitability in terms of personal qualities and prior experience, and your potential.

You will be asked questions about

- Your pre-prepared presentation – Describe the research; provide an overview of methodologies; be clear on the part you played in it. Depending on the piece of research you highlight, this might be a good place to show how you worked well in a team; how you worked well at something independently (on your own); if you encountered issues point these out and show how you found solutions or routes through.
- Your proposed PhD - Be prepared to reiterate the skills you bring; knowledge you have; and experience you possess (non-academic and academic). You should also

try to demonstrate your interest in and passion for the project, and what you hope to learn/discover. Ideally, the panel will be looking to see some of the originality and creative, independent thinking in your written project proposal show here.

- Your career and training – The panel may ask questions that help to validate your CV and application statements. Also, they will be looking for potential and trajectory. Try to think about where you want the degree to take you in the future. Also, think about an area (or a few) you will need skills development and training, and how this might be possible through the DTP (no-one is perfect, and the panel will want to see that you are able to self-analyse and be critically aware, and have plans to develop and overcome areas that are less strong/perceived weaknesses).

During the interview: remember to listen rather than panicking about what your next answer could be. And if you get asked a question where your mind goes blank don't panic: it's fine to pause to think of your answer, so don't rush yourself. Also, if you realise mid-answer that you've got yourself into a muddle and the answer isn't going to be clear if you continue, you can stop and start again. Your interviewers are on your side - we've all been in the same position at some point! A well-structured and coherent answer requiring a bit of a pause is infinitely preferable to jumping in with lots of words that don't provide a clear answer or example.

Generic questions that are asked in a lot of PhD interviews, and which may be covered (with this or different wording) in your interview, with some examples and tips, follow at the end of this document.

How should I prepare before the interview?

Contact the referees you named on your application and let them know that they will be contacted by MRC LID, as they will need to provide a reference to the DTP for you before the interview date.

Make sure Zoom has been downloaded and you have used it before (so you know how to use the camera and mute functions, and that you know how to share and un-share your screen).

Make sure your network connection is suitable for a meeting with multiple people. The panel will be expecting cameras on.

Think about the space you will be sat in for the duration of the interview. Consider the background and the impression it may give the panelists. Try to find somewhere where you will not be disturbed from 10-15 minutes prior to the start of the interview all the way through to when you leave the interview.

Ensure that the people who live with you are aware that you are not available for the duration, and make sure that alternative arrangements have been made for all dependents.

Switch off your phone (or at least turn it to silent).

Prepare your presentation. This should be on a piece of research that you have previously been involved in (not your proposed PhD project). You should plan to talk for 5 minutes. Most applicants choose to use slides (a Powerpoint presentation) to support their talk. If you choose to, please note that your presentation should consist of no more than 3 slides in total (including title page, references, footnotes, and whatever else you choose to include/exclude). The board has a preference for static slides. A copy of the final slides should be sent to the MRC LID email address at least two days in advance of the interview. This ensures that the panel have a saved back-up in case it is needed (for example, if your

internet connection becomes unstable, or the Zoom screen share function doesn't work, the panellists will be able to refer to the copy previously sent by email as you speak). We would encourage you to practise your presentation and time it ahead of the interview date.

MRC LID offers studentship awards based on the applicant's potential, not the project. This can mean that more than one applicant is interviewed for the same project. Please consider whether you would wish to accept a studentship if you weren't given your first-choice project and think about which other project/s you might be willing to consider instead. (If you end up in this position the team will talk you through the process, and support the next steps.) You may be asked by the panel what alternatives (if any) you'd be interested in.

The MRC LID Programme provides additional funding to support

- (a) Training
- (b) A 3-month (FTE) placement completely disconnected from your PhD project. The DTP believes that this is a valuable opportunity for students, as they provide people with experience of the wider research environment, demonstrate how research feeds into the development of products or policy, expand the student's network of contacts, facilitate their career development, and give access to expertise beyond their immediate research group.

You may want to think about some initial ideas around these options, as the board may want to explore these with you. If you can discuss these with your proposed supervisory team between now and the interview you should consider doing so.

I am an international student. What is the funding situation?

Every MRC LID Studentship will provide (for the duration of the studentship, and prorated for periods and mode of study)

- Tuition fees at the 'Home' (UK) fee rate
- A stipend at the UKRI stipend rate, including London weighting
- Some funding support towards research costs, training, placement costs etc.

Awardees who are nationals of, and resident in, a low- to middle-income country will be awarded a supplementary funding award by their primary institution (St George's or LSHTM). This second funding award is a separate fees-only bursary from the institution – not MRC LID - which will cover the difference between Home (UK) tuition fees and overseas tuition fees.

International applicants who are nationals of high-income countries, and/or who are resident in high-income countries, will be expected to pay the difference between Home (UK) tuition fees and international fees through funding they have secured separately (eg a different 'external' scholarship). Interviewees in this situation should be prepared to discuss this with their interview panel (who may ask what steps have been taken to secure funding; where you are expecting the funding to come from; whether it has been awarded or is still to be decided; when you will know the outcome of applications made).

What other studentship commitments should I keep in mind for the interview?

- Students are expected to be based in London (or within commutable distance) for the duration of their studies (excepting periods of training or fieldwork or placement).
- Students are expected to attend all MRC LID training sessions. These will comprise 2-3 set days a year, plus occasional one-off sessions.
- Students are expected to undertake a 3-month placement which is not connected to their funding.

Will I meet other applicants?

Pre-pandemic, MRC LID arranged a formal, two-day, in-person interview process. This meant that all applicants who made the interview stage met everyone in the same situation.

With video conferencing interviews you may only briefly meet other interviewees who are also awaiting their interview slot (with a different panel to yours).

It is likely that everyone will be in the same situation (nervous, and just trying to get in the right frame of mind for their interview). Remember that you are not being evaluated by these other interviewees and that you are here for yourself. Try not to compare yourself to them and focus on what makes you the best candidate for the program. If you view other interviewees as potential collaborators or colleagues rather than competitors, you will most likely have more pleasant interactions with them.

What advice can you give me about meeting current/past students (cohort members)?

Shortlisted applicants are welcome to contact current students to find out about their experiences. They are all shown on our MRC LID website. Applicants who attended our Open Day will have heard from a few of our students there.

Here are some ideas for questions that you can ask current graduate students:

- What current research projects are you working on?
- What are the opportunities for collaboration in research?
- How is your relationship with your primary advisor?
- Do you feel supported by the program?
- If you could change anything about the program, what would it be?
- How is your quality of life given the location and the stipend?
- Do you generally get along with other students both in and outside of your cohort?

Other students are great resources when trying to understand if a programme is right for you. However, take their advice with a grain of salt—their experience (whether positive or negative) is likely to be different from yours. In the end, you'll have to make the final call for yourself if a programme feels like the right fit.

When will I hear whether I am being offered a studentship or not?

MRC LID will be interviewing a number of students. Once the interviews are over, the panels will convene to discuss and finalise the awards and reserves list. We aim to inform interviewees of the outcome as soon as possible afterwards, but it may take a few working days.

What happens if I am unsuccessful?

If you do not receive an offer for 2022-23 MRC LID Studentship funding afterwards, then do not be discouraged. Many of our students have been in this position, but reapplied at the next application cycle and were successful.

Ultimately, the majority of applicants interviewed will be unsuccessful (we only have 9 awards and are interviewing 26 candidates). This does not mean there is anything wrong with you or your interview. It may just be that someone else was marginally better on the day.

To help with future applications and interviews you may find it useful to: keep notes; make a record of the pros and cons of each interview experience; rely on other students or mentors you may know that can give you helpful advice; and try not to be too overwhelmed by the process.

What will happen to my application and interview records?

We will keep your application documents, records of the interview and its outcome. These will be kept in a secure and confidential place for a limited period of time. The DTP will make sure that only relevant people use this information for the relevant purposes (as per the Data Protection Act and GDPR regulations).

Generic interview questions

These are questions that are often used in PhD interviews (both for projects and for funding). Some of these may be covered in your MRC LID interview. You probably want to think about the general area of information these cover, what a panel is trying to learn from them and therefore what your response to these types of question might be, so that you are well prepared for the interview.

Tell us about yourself, your background and interests.

Your interview panel isn't trying to catch you out here. They're offering an icebreaker to help ease you into the rest of the interview.

Obviously your response should be relevant to the occasion. But it doesn't just have to be a run-down of your academic achievements, interests and goals (the interviewers have your documents and will get to questions about those in time).

Say a little about your background, where you're from and what your interests are. Don't be afraid to relate these to your academic specialism and your choice of university. If something specifically inspired you to consider a PhD, mention it.

Why do you want to do a PhD?

Your answer should be honest, passionate, well thought through and articulate.

Why have you chosen this project?

What makes your project distinctive?

What would you like the impact of this project to be?

Why have you chosen to study this PhD/study at this university?

You need to show here what you already know about your subject: any research you've already completed and why you're inspired to go further. You need to be able to say how your research will make a unique impact, what it will involve and what you're hoping to gain from it when you've completed it. The gains should be both personal for you and also for academic research and the university itself. Highlight key stats and facts you've already gathered to show your knowledge. It's also ok to say what you don't yet know and how you want to discover the answers with your PhD (although you should be aware of lines of evidence you might want to pursue). Whatever you talk about in this area should be feasible within a 4-year FTE PhD.

Most supervisors and interview panels want to know that applicants have an understanding of recent literature in their research area as well as understanding of methodological issues

and any ethical concerns. So, you may want to think about ethics; confidentiality; and reconciling different viewpoints and research with your own as well as your research interests.

No matter how carefully you plan, no research project is completed without any hitches. Be honest about where you see potential challenges, but more importantly discuss how you plan to work through them. (An example of how to prepare for this may be: consider the limitations of your methodology. Think about how these methodological flaws could be addressed, if at all. If the methodological flaws cannot be addressed, think of reasons why they cannot be resolved i.e. ethical issues, cost, time, accessibility of participants, availability of equipment etc.)

Try to cover how your PhD fits with and expands on the research already being undertaken in your specific department. Think about PhD specific benefits. Think about anything else in particular that you like about the university or department. Potential supervisors and the DTP want to find out why you will be a good fit for them, so make sure you've done your research and explain any other positives that draw you to applying for a place with them.

What makes you the right applicant for this project?

Think about the key demands of the PhD and identify how your current skill set makes you a good candidate for managing those demands. Comb through the PhD application for detail and consider the initial discussions you had with the prospective supervisory team. Are the skills and demands theoretical, methodological or applied? For instance, is the PhD concerned with testing a specific theory? Does it require you to collect data in a novel way? Will you be integrated with a non-academic partner? Most importantly, after identifying the PhD specific skills and demands, relate them to your own experiences. Do you understand the main theory underlying the PhD? Have you collected data similarly to how the PhD is collecting data? Have you worked closely with other stakeholders in developing applied impact? Showing that you understand the demands and specific skills required of the PhD will demonstrate you can see the “bigger picture” and can identify the fundamental properties of the PhD.

What do you plan to do after you complete your PhD?

This is another way to work out your motivations for doing a PhD and see if you have thought about what you will do next. How will a PhD help you achieve your future goals? Someone with a clear goal in mind is likely to be more committed to doing a PhD. For many, the goal will be to pursue an academic career, in which case this is an opportunity to show you understand the academic career path.

Do you have any questions for us?

This is an opportunity to make this a two-way conversation, where you can see whether this DTP would be a good fit for you. Many of the questions that are on standard interview advice pages are answered on the web pages of your primary institution and/or the DTP. It would be wise to familiarise yourself with this information, so that you don't waste the opportunity to ask questions on this prosaic and accessible information unless you feel that you need further clarification with how this applies to your specific situation.

Part-time study only

If you are applying to study on a part-time basis, you will be asked the same questions as for full-time applicants. However, it is likely that your interviewers may wish to ask some additional questions such as how you expect to balance your other commitments with doctoral study. You might be asked:

- What do you expect by way of arrangements as a part-time student i.e. what access to your supervisor(s), services and facilities are you expecting?

- What do you expect your attendance at the School (for taught courses) to be?
- Have you considered a forward-plan of how commitments to employers will harmonise with the intensive requirements of doctoral study?
- Have you reached a formal agreement with your employer?
- What time/travel demands do you think will be necessary to undertake fieldwork? How will this be managed with your employment?

Other potential sources of information

Some other places you might want to look at:

- <https://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/phd-interview-questions.aspx>
- https://www.postgrad.com/advice/phd/interview_dos_and_donts/
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/masters-degrees/postgraduate-interview-questions>
- <https://blog.r3ciprocitiy.com/phd-interviews-what-does-an-interview-mean-for-a-phd-doctorate-in-business/?nab=1>