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MRC LID Studentships: Interview information

Information in this document has been created and collated for applicants who have been invited to attend an MRC LID interview.

Introduction

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 (interviews). This is an achievement in itself.

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 two independent MRC LID board members' review. 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 by email.

Those whose applications have been unsuccessful will be notified of this, and will be given any specific feedback provided by the review panels.

Those whose applications have been selected for the interview shortlist will be sent individual emails advising that they have been successful in progressing to the next stage, and inviting them to attend for interview.

Should I apply for admission to my primary institution at this stage?

Please don't apply via the LSHTM or SGUL Admissions system yet. If your interview is successful, and you are offered a studentship, you will be asked to apply for study at that stage if required.

Why does the DTP conduct 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 these three points in the back of your mind:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Remember that this is also your opportunity to interview 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 (in London)?

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 email from MRC LID.

Please be aware that interviews may be recorded. This is because MRC LID arranges simultaneous interviews across multiple panels. Recordings allow the MRC LID Board to form an additional and external perspective where there is a query and/or scoring is very close (for cross-panel checks and moderations). All recordings made will be held securely, used only by interview panels and the MRC LID board, and will be deleted at the time award and reserve list decisions are finalised.

If the interview is not in person in London how will I get a sense of the institution I'm hoping to study at?

Both partner institutions offer onsite and/or virtual Open Days. For more details of what is available, and how to sign up for these please see

- [SGUL Study-Visit Us page](#)
- [LSHTM Study-Visit Us-Open Day page](#)

The email invitation mentions “reasonable adjustments” may be provided. 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 approximately 35-45 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). As part of this, the panel will also want to find out more about your background and achievement; any hurdles and barriers you've overcome; and your motivation for undertaking research degree studies.

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 you have previously studied and applied; 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.

MRC LID panellists will be keeping in mind UKRI expectations of the [skills and experience required to win funding support](#) (see the PhD Studentship section).

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 ie what access to your supervisor(s), services and facilities are you expecting?
- * What do you expect your attendance at your primary institution to be (for taught courses and other training)?
- * Have you considered a forward-plan of how commitments to employers and/or other responsibilities and commitments will harmonise with the intensive requirements of doctoral study?
- * Have you reached a formal agreement with your employer (if applicable)?
- * What time/travel demands do you think will be necessary to undertake fieldwork? How will this be managed with your employment and/or other commitments?

1+4 Route only

If you have applied for the 1+4 route the interview panel may ask you questions about this. They will want to know why you feel this route is a better option for you than the +4 route. They will also want to know which Master's taught programme you would like to enrol on, the reasons for this, and the link to how this fits with your past studies and career, and your proposed research project.

How should I prepare before the interview?

Contact your referees

As soon as you know you are shortlisted for 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.

Contact your proposed supervisory team

Your proposed project supervisory team can help you to prepare for the interview. Prospective supervisors are keen to have you as a student, so feel free to ask them for additional tips, and maybe a mock interview. Mock interviews are a great opportunity to practice presenting your slides, and answering questions you haven't thought about before about your previous work and prospects as a PhD student.

Join a cohort drop-in session

Current MRC LID students have volunteered their time to run a couple of drop-in sessions via Zoom specifically for this year's interviewees. Details will be in your invitation to interview email. These online sessions are intended to be an informal, interactive, friendly opportunity to ask general questions and/or fill in any gaps in your information (covering anything that is

not on web pages and/or provided by supervisors), or get clarification on anything that seems unclear at this stage. See more information about contacting current and past students under the [contacting the cohort FAQ](#).

Prepare your presentation

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 use slides please note:

- 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 working 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 plays up, 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.

What else should I know?

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.

How should I prepare on the day of the interview?

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 panellists. 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).

I am an international student. What should I know about 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, and
- A stipend at the UKRI minimum stipend rate, including London weighting, and
- Some funding support towards research costs and training.

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 research project.

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 are unlikely to meet other interviewees. Depending on the Zoom set-up, at most you may only briefly meet other interviewees who are also awaiting their interview slot (with a different panel to yours).

If you do:

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 programme. If you view other interviewees as potential collaborators or colleagues rather than competitors, you will most likely have more pleasant interactions with them.

Can I get any advice from current/past students (cohort members)?

Applicants who watched our [MRC LID Applicant Workshop](#) recordings will have heard from a few of our students there. Shortlisted applicants are welcome to contact current students to find out about their experiences. Details of our current and past students are shown on our MRC LID website.

This year's cohort have also offered to host a couple of online drop-in sessions (see further details in your invitation to interview email) for all interviewees.

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

- Do you have any tips that you can pass on (things you wish you'd known at this stage of the application process)?
- How was your transition to research studies?
- What is a usual work day like for you?
- What current research projects are you working on?
- What are the opportunities for collaboration in your research?
- Do you work closely with other academics? Do you work closely with other students?
- What is your relationship with your primary supervisor like?
- Were there any specific reasons why you chose MRC LID over other options?
- Do you feel supported by the programme?
- What training have you benefitted from so far?
- If you could change anything about the programme, what would it be?
- What advice do you have about living and working in London?
- For international students: What were the most tricky bits for you to work out and plan before moving to the UK?
- Are there good opportunities to meet the cohort? At the institution generally (all students – not just those funded by MRC LID)? Through the DTP?

Other students are a great resource when trying to understand if an institution and 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 decision for yourself about whether a programme feels like the right fit for you.

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

MRC LID will be interviewing a number of students on the interview day/s. 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 not successful?

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

Ultimately, the majority of applicants interviewed will be unsuccessful (we only have up to 9 awards and are interviewing around 20-30 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).

Where can I find out more about what other information and services are available to students?

There is a great deal of information provided on the web pages for the institution that will be your primary institution (where the first named supervisor for your proposed project is based).

LSHTM [Information for New Students](#) and [Student Services](#)
SGUL [Get started: A guide for new students](#), [Life at St George's](#) and [Student Support](#)

These links will cover living in London, accommodation, initial registration, additional details for international students, and all sorts of other information.

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?

Think about what motivated you to choose this particular project instead of a different one. How is the project aligned to your interests in related topics, the skills you want to develop, the impact of the work, or what is its usefulness to your future career?

What makes your project distinctive?

Which skills, interests, and motivation are you bringing into the project that you believe will stand out compared with other applicants?

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

Think about the likely impact of your work on the field you are interested in, as well as how you can you work towards maximizing its impact.

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 ie 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. Then ask: 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 by asking questions on this prosaic and accessible information (unless you feel that you need further clarification with how this applies to your specific situation).

Other potential sources of information

Some other places you might want to look at:

<https://www.findaphd.com/guides/phd-interview-questions>

https://www.postgrad.com/advice/phd/interview_dos_and_donts/

<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/masters-degrees/postgraduate-interviewquestions>

<https://blog.r3cipracity.com/phd-interviews-what-does-an-interview-mean-for-a-phddoctorate-in-business/?nab=1>

(This last one is based on a US graduate scheme, but some of the generic information may be useful to some interviewees.)