



Congratulations on making it to this stage! Pat yourself on the back because at least two separate academic staff panels have reviewed your application and decided that you have done well enough to make it to the next stage of this highly competitive funding scheme (interviews). This is an achievement in itself.

## Introduction

Information in this document has been created and collated for applicants who have been invited to attend an MRC LID interview. 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 independent MRC LID board member reviews. 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 (where the first named supervisor for your proposed project is based) at this stage?*

Please don't apply yet via the Admissions system at either City St George's, University of London (CSG) or London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). If your interview is successful, and you are offered a studentship, you will be asked to apply for study at that stage – and only if this is required by your primary institution.

### *Why does the DTP conduct interviews?*

Your application form and submitted documents have already been assessed, and the information provided considered 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 research degree (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 will 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 is the capacity to conduct independent study and learning – inquiry, exploration, experimentation, and analysis. It requires you to be intellectually curious, 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 MRC LID 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 (or more, for any part-time students or to cover any approved absences over that time period). 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 interviews (in London)?***

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

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 Chairs, 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

- [City St George's Research Degree Open Events](#)
- [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:

- [Disability Awareness Standard Reasonable Adjustments for interviews](#)



- [Scope Interview Adjustments](#)
- [Employment Autism Reasonable Adjustments for interviews and assessments](#)
- [Mind 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:

- [City St George's Disability Support](#) and [Student Support Services Health & Wellbeing](#)
- [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 interview panel?***

The interview panel will consist of 3-4 academic staff from the MRC LID Board.

Usually, 2-3 panels are interviewing simultaneously on interview day. And, therefore, we are unable to tell you the names of the interviewers in advance. You should expect that they will be academic staff from across a range of disciplines (they are not likely to be specialists in your proposed research area).

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 their names 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?***

Introductions: The panel will introduce themselves.

Presentation: They will ask you to do your pre-prepared timed (5 minute max) presentation on a piece of research you have previously been involved in or are currently working on.

Questions: 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 achievements; 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?***

The interviewers will ask questions so that they can better understand your ideas, attitudes, and motivations. 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 – Be prepared to describe the research for a non-specialist panel, focussing on 'the bigger picture'. Further information is available later in this document to help you prepare your presentation. Please do not focus on detailed methodology unless this is required and you intend to explain it clearly and concisely (given the time constraints of an interview) to the non-specialist panel members.
- Your proposed PhD - Be prepared to reiterate the skills you bring; knowledge you have; and experience you possess (non-academic and academic). This should be through real life examples that show your understanding of yourself, a PhD and your projects, as well as showing your transferable skills and readiness for independent research. 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 of your written project proposal show through here.
- Your career and training – The panel may ask questions that help to validate your CV-like information 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 worrying 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 become 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 in your interview, (with some examples and tips) follow at the end of this document. Please note that the examples in this document are to give you a broad idea of the types of questions usually asked so you know the general gist of information panels tend to look for. The questions asked in your interview may have different wording, even if the panel is looking for the same sort of information.

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

### **Additional questions for applicants for part-time study**

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 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?

### **Additional questions for applicants for the 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(s) you would like to enrol on, the reasons for this, and the link to how this route and your proposed Master's studies 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 by email. They will need to provide a reference to the DTP for you before the interview date.

If one of your referees is unable to do this, or you want to change your referee, please contact MRC LID with an alternative referee's name and contact details (as soon as possible and before/at the time you accept the invitation for interview – otherwise we may send a request to the original named referee).



### 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 check whether they can support you with a practice (or 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.

Please make sure that you have read through this document in advance of any preparations and meeting with them, so that you can highlight any key requirements and information from MRC LID for the supervisory team (where appropriate). This is important as different schemes have different requirements, and it is useful for supervisors to have this in mind when they discuss the interview preparations with you.

### Prepare your presentation

Prepare your presentation. This should be on a piece of research that you have previously been involved in or are currently working on (not your proposed PhD project).

You should plan to talk for approximately 5 minutes. You will likely want to use as much of this time as you can to share and give the panel enough detail. But please do not exceed this time limit as the panel will likely cut you off when the 5-minute duration is reached.

We would encourage you to practise your presentation and time it ahead of the interview date.

The interview panel will comprise academic staff from a wide range of disciplines, who will be interviewing people across a range of projects and disciplines. They are unlikely to have detailed knowledge of your prospective project. You will need to ensure that your preparations (both for the presentation and general questions section) take this into account by focussing on "the bigger picture", and by making sure you are getting across your experience and work to a non-expert audience.

You should start the presentation by providing some background that's suitable for everyone. Also, please provide a clear overview of the work and a context for the research, and show what your role in the research/project was (and who else helped and how (what their role/s were)). Given the panel, you should include only high-level, brief information about methodologies you have previously studied and applied (and only where applicable) - methodologies should not be the focus of the presentation. Depending on the piece of research you highlight, this might be a good place to show how you worked well in a team (describing who else helped and how (what their role/s were)); demonstrate how you worked well at something independently (on your own); transferable skills developed; and, if you encountered issues, note what these were and explain how you found solutions or routes through.

Most applicants choose to use slides (a PowerPoint presentation) to support their talk, but this is not a requirement. If you choose to use slides please note:

- The board has a preference for static slides.
- Your presentation should consist of no more than 3 slides in total, including title page, references, footnotes, and everything else you may be planning to include e.g.



title page, references, footnotes, infographics. (Please note that these are just examples – based on previous interviewees' questions. This is not an indication or suggestion of what should or shouldn't be on your slides. For example, whilst most applicants choose not to use a title page some do, where they feel this is appropriate and suitable.)

- A copy of the final slides should be sent to the MRC LID email address at least two full 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, as you speak the panellists will be able to refer to the copy previously sent by email).

### Other preparation tips

Without wanting to sound too much like a parent or nag, give yourself the best chance of success by planning to rest and get enough sleep the night before. Avoid the temptation to over-cram or rehearse your presentation compulsively.

Please read through this entire document at the time you're invited for interview and accept.

Please also take note of this feedback from the MRC LID Board interview panellists (based on previous interview rounds):

- Don't undersell yourself. Don't oversell yourself. Be clear on what you will bring, and what you plan to learn along the way through your PhD studies and MRC LID funding.
- Don't tell the panel how good you are without context or explanation. Instead, show yourself to the best of your abilities when answering the questions by telling the panel how/what you did and why that makes you a good candidate (using the context of actual past and current events). Your answers should not be just statements, for example, 'I am a good candidate.' There is nothing in that statement that explains or provides evidence of your experiences, transferable skills, and potential. And nothing that would be 'scorable' compared to the other 20-30 applicants who are also interviewing for the 8-9 available studenthip spaces. (This scenario is frustrating for the interview panel who believe that you may be a great candidate and are trying to get a sense of who you are. However, because they are following a [competency and behavioural based interview framework](#) and scoring system they can't give a score on statements that are not verified with real life examples.) Your answer should show why you are the right applicant and a good fit by answering with a 'because...' mindset and clear examples.

To help you with this request, you may find it useful to familiarise yourself with, and then practice using, the [STAR approach](#) to answering interview questions.

Using the STAR method to structure some interview answers can be a useful way to communicate important points clearly and concisely. This is especially useful if you get nervous and ramble during interviews (like many of us do) or if you worry about what details to include or leave out when explaining your experience. In this method, for every answer you should identify the:

- **Situation** - Briefly describe the circumstance or challenge you faced (one to two sentences).



- **Task** - Explain the task or objective you were responsible for achieving (one sentence).
- **Action** - Explain what you did and how and why you did it. Note the hard and soft skills you used to accomplish the task and resolve the situation (three to five sentences).
- **Result** - Describe the outcome and impact your actions had on the situation (one to two sentences).
- **(Reflections or Takeaways)** – This is an add-on to remind you to include what you learned from the experience and whether you might do things differently next time, if appropriate.

The STAR framework offers numerous benefits when answering interview questions. It provides a clear and structured approach which will help you organise your thoughts and focus on sharing relevant impactful details, while omitting unnecessary information. It creates a direct link between past achievements and future potential, so that the interview panel understands your qualifications and competence without ambiguity. It allows you to highlight your capabilities and transferable skills in tangible and measurable ways (past achievements and deliverables), and to showcase your self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and professional growth by illustrating how you have learned to navigate complex situations.

The examples you choose should clearly demonstrate the skill or capability you're being asked about (at an appropriate level of complexity). You should give as much detail as is relevant to bring your examples to life. This means using factual information with real dates, timescales and names. This will help provide a rounded example with enough relevant detail for a non-specialist interviewer to understand what you're trying to convey. (All interviewees worry about sounding less impressive than other people, and are concerned about honesty hurting their chances of success. All the same, avoid embellishing the truth. Untruths or invented examples are usually found out with follow-up questions or post-interview checks. Honesty will help you feel authentic, and it builds trust with the interview panellists.)

Ideally you want to ensure you have a good variety of examples that can be used and adapted across a range of questions. If you rely on only one or two examples throughout the interview then you are unlikely to be successful. Examples need to be relevant to the question asked, so consider how you may use experiences from across the breadth of your life (not just your current work/study) in your answers to give the best detail.

Of course, some questions don't require a STAR response (for example, 'Why did you choose this PhD project?'). If you aren't sure whether the answer calls for a story, you can answer the question without one and the interviewer will likely follow up and ask for an example.

### ***What else should I know?***

MRC LID offers studentship awards based on each applicant's potential, not their selected 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 if you would, please think about which other project(s) you might be willing to consider instead. Think about which advertised projects might be suitable for your plans and trajectory and whether you would be eligible for any of them. (If you end up in this



position the MRC LID admin team will talk you through the process, and support the next steps.) You may be asked by the interview panel what alternatives, if any, you'd be interested in.

The MRC LID Programme provides additional funding to support training specific to your needs and development, and a 3-month (FTE) placement completely unconnected from your PhD project. The DTP believes that the placement is a valuable opportunity for students, as they can provide experience of the wider research environment, demonstrate how research feeds into the development of products or policy, expand a 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 interview panel 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 an online meeting with multiple people and screen sharing. 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).

Remember these tips for calming your mind:

- Breathe deeply and slowly.
- Use positive re-framing, for example see the interview as an opportunity, not a problem.
- Have a glass of water, it can help to calm your nerves.
- Practice the answers you have prepared.
- Give yourself plenty of time to prepare yourself before the interview starts (this is important – treat the online interview the same way as you would a physical one, aiming to be there a few minutes in advance).
- Ask for more time or for the question to be repeated if you need it.

### ***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 second, supplementary funding award by their primary institution (City 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 (International) tuition fees for the same time period as any MRC LID Studentship award.

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 Overseas (International) fees through funding they have secured separately e.g. a different 'external' scholarship. Interviewees in this situation should be prepared to discuss the additional 'top-up' funding source(s) with their interview panel and/or the MRC LID Manager. They may ask what steps have been taken to secure funding; where you are expecting the funding to come from; if it is another scheme, 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?***

MRC LID funded students are expected to be based in London (or within daily commutable distance) for the duration of their studies excepting periods of training, fieldwork or placement.

Students are expected to attend all mandatory MRC LID training, which will occur 2-3 times a year (each 1-2 full day sessions). Students will also be offered occasional one-off optional sessions.

Students are expected to undertake a 3-month (FTE) placement which is not connected to their research project.

### ***Will I meet other applicants?***

MRC LID used to 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. Over the course of the current DTP, as we have moved to video conferencing interviews, it has been less likely that applicants will 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 instead 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. Also, applicants who attended the MRC LID Applicant-Cohort drop-in session will have had the opportunity to ask questions about their experiences at that time.



You are welcome to contact current students to find out about their experiences. They may or may not be available to answer. If they do not respond to your email, please accept this (it might not be a good time for them). Details of our current and past students are shown on our MRC LID website.

It may also be possible to speak to student volunteers at your primary institution. Or find out more about the institution from various web pages, including [student blogs](#).

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 institutional RD programme? Do you feel supported by the MRC LID Studentship 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?
- Are there good opportunities to meet the cohort? At the institution generally (all students – not just those funded by MRC LID)? Through the DTP?
- And for international students: What were the most tricky bits for you to work out and plan before moving to the UK?

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. 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 was anything wrong with you or your interview. It may just be that someone else was marginally better on the day. Many of our students have been in this



position, but have reapplied at the next application cycle and been successful at the next attempt.

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;
- get advice from other students or mentors;
- 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 secure and confidential for a limited period of time to cover audit requirements. 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).

- City St George's
  - [Prospective Students – Student Life](#)
  - [Get started: A guide for new students](#)
- LSHTM
  - [Information for New Students](#)
  - [Student Experience](#)
  - [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 research degree (PhD) interviews, both for projects/admissions and for funding. Some of these may be covered in your MRC LID interview. You probably want to think about

- (a) the general area of information these questions cover and
- (b) what a panel is trying to learn from them
- (c) 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 choice of academic specialism and university.

### **Why do you want to do a PhD?**

This is important as PhD students need to have the incentive and drive to see them through 4 years FTE of independent, hard work on the project. Bear in mind that the panel is already satisfied that you're academically capable and interested - that's why you were invited to the interview.

If something specifically inspired you to consider a PhD, mention it. With this question, the panel will be looking at your aspirations and motivations (not some generic response). Your answer should be honest, passionate, well thought through and articulate. This is likely to be different, and varied across the student cohort, but you should have a good reason for wanting to undertake a PhD.

### **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 and the skills you want to develop? What is the impact of the work, and/or what is its usefulness to your future career?

### **What makes your project distinctive?**

A PhD is defined as offering 'an original contribution to knowledge.' So you need to understand your project well enough to be able to re-iterate what makes it distinctive.

If your panel is non-specialist (as it often is for funding, and will be for MRC LID) the interviews are genuinely interested in what you have to say. However, they do not expect you to provide the same level of detail that experts in your precise area might - the time allocated for an interview does not allow for this and they will want to cover other questions too.

They will want to understand why your work is genuinely important (not merely interesting) and how it sits within the field, and to see that you understand your project and are motivated and enthusiastic. Be prepared to think at the peripheries of your research and to make links.

### **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 work towards maximising its impact.

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

You can be honest about what particularly has attracted you to the particular institution and/or funding scheme (for example, expertise; unique opportunity; facilities and resources; student satisfaction).

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 achievements and gains should be both personal for you and also wider (academic research and the university itself). Highlight key, high-level



statistics 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. Overcoming them will be part of completing a PhD; recognising them will show that you're ready to begin one. 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 such as ethical issues, cost, time, accessibility of participants, availability of equipment etc.) Don't be afraid to identify problems you aren't yet certain how to solve but suggest how you might go about investigating them.

Try to cover how your PhD fits with and expands on the research already being undertaken in your specific area. Think about PhD specific benefits. Think about anything else in particular that you like about the university, faculty or institute 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?**

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

Advice here: "Try to connect the dots, illustrating (show don't tell) how your experience so far has made you uniquely prepared to tackle your future research project. Make sure to include your 'Big Vision' at the beginning and end."

This is a good place to talk about your motivation and commitment, and possibly your previous qualifications and experience (the application shows your prior institution/s and grades but not what you actually did, or how you feel about the specific topic/subject area, or how you've been working your way to where you are now). Also 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 are your strengths/weaknesses?**

This is an opportunity to show your self-awareness, to be honest about things you're good at (not boastfully) and things you find challenging, and to think about how this might lead to opportunities for training, growth and development over the course of your PhD. The panel is interested in your ability to identify these (rather than the details of any specific strength (or weakness)) and show that you've reflected on how they might affect or relate to the PhD project. You should aim to have a couple of points with concrete examples.

Consider your strengths in terms of soft skills (such as teamwork; organisation; creativity; good time-keeping; ability to stay calm under pressure; overcoming a challenge; problem solving; resilience; leadership such as supporting or motivating others or organising an event). It's best not to exaggerate or embellish your strengths.

All candidates will have weaknesses. The key is to identify one or two areas that you know you could be better at and that you're currently working on overcoming (and improving).

You should show that you've thought about how you can take advantages of development opportunities within the DTP structure (including the mandatory programme requirements). Think about what taught modules, external training courses and other opportunities might be useful, what you hope to gain from them and how you think they'll help you succeed in your PhD (or what transferable skills they may provide).

### **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? It is also a mechanism to review your education and career trajectory, and demonstrate how this research project might be a logical and relevant step towards your future plans.

This question doesn't mean that you should have everything worked out for 3-4 years' time. Neither does it require you to have unique ambitions. Even if you don't have a detailed plan, you should have some general idea of where you are going at the next step and have some knowledge of the career path options available to you. Also, you should be able to explain how the PhD programme will enable you to get there.

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 see whether this DTP would be a good fit for you. After all, the interview is a two-way assessment. Asking good questions can demonstrate applicant motivation, showing that you've given some genuine consideration to the research project and MRC LID programme. You may want to think of a few focussed questions on the scheme (as applicable).



You shouldn't ask questions just for the sake of filling this time. Many of the questions that are on standard interview advice pages are answered on the internet pages of your primary institution and/or the DTP. It would be wise to familiarise yourself with this information before the interview, so that you don't waste the opportunity by asking questions on easily accessible information (unless you feel that you need further clarification with how this applies to your specific situation). Otherwise, to do so may suggest to the interview panel a lack of interest and self-motivation to research.

### **Other potential sources of information**

For generic (and similar responses) if you do an internet search for 'doctoral' or 'PhD' 'interview' in the UK you are likely to get similar generic advice from

- (a) most recruitment websites (e.g. [Reed](#) or [Indeed](#) or [jobs.ac.uk](#))
- (b) studentship funding platforms (e.g. [FindAPhD](#) or [Postgrad.com](#) or [PostgradStudentships](#) or [Prospects](#))
- (c) different universities' own websites.