



MRC LID Feedback for unsuccessful applicants

MRC London Intercollegiate Doctoral Training Partnership (MRC LID) is unable to provide individual feedback on why an application has been unsuccessful. However, there are some generic reasons why many of the studentship applications do not succeed. This document provides a short overview of the most important and common of these reasons.

There are three fundamental reasons why MRC LID Studentship applications tend to be unsuccessful. These are:

- Failure to follow instructions and/or provide required documentation.
- Poor or unsuitable research project proposal.
- Competition for available funding.

Failure to follow instructions and/or provide documentation

MRC LID provides a range of web pages, documents, and recordings to enable applicants to understand our application processes and the opportunities available, and to provide suitable support for every applicant. It is therefore essential that applicants use these and follow the instructions carefully prior to completing and submitting their application.

Incomplete information

MRC LID selection panels aim to make decisions on who receives studentship funding purely on the basis of the information provided in an application and required documents. The academic panels use all required documents to assess key criteria, score applications and make an overall assessment of an applicant's potential and suitability for the scheme. If an applicant does not submit all of the required documentation the MRC LID has no option but to mark only on what has been provided (and therefore reflect a lower overall application score) and/or to mark the application as ineligible for the funding opportunity.

Studentship minimum criteria

Where an applicant does not meet the essential, minimum criteria (as set out on the MRC LID Studentship web pages) their application cannot be considered for MRC LID funding.

Minimum academic requirements

To be eligible for our funding applicants are required to meet minimum academic requirements (or mix of academic qualifications and relevant experiences), as set out on the research degree pages for the primary institution. MRC LID cannot override each institution's minimum academic standards. And therefore, any applicant who does not provide evidence that they have fulfilled this requirement is automatically excluded.

Misunderstanding of funding offer

MRC LID only provides funding for the research degree projects advertised for the specific academic year of recruitment. These research projects are only available if a student is based at one of the partner institutions (City St George's or LSHTM). MRC LID will not consider applications for other (non-advertised) research degree projects submitted or for requests to fund studies at another institution.



Research project formatting

This year, MRC LID set very strict limits on the word count of project proposals. The [Applicant Guidance and FAQs](#) noted (under FAQ 25): *'Please do not exceed 2,000 words in total (excluding the project proposal title and your name, but including all other aspects of your proposal including paragraph/section headings and references). In previous years there has been some leeway on this requirement. However, applicant numbers and resources mean this is no longer possible. Please note: For this round, your application will be rejected for this funding scheme if your proposal is below 1,000 words or over 2,000 words (the maximum word count).'*

This was reiterated in the [Online Application Questions and Guidance](#), which stated (under the Tips, Hints & Notes, Q.7-13): *'You should bear in mind that the entire proposal – including any supplementary information and references - should not exceed the word count. ... Project proposals that are over the maximum word count limit will be automatically excluded (before potential assessment).'* (Additional highlighting in maroon added here.)

This was strictly adhered to, with word counts including all elements of a project proposal - including inserts and additions such as tables or infographics or other visual elements.

Use of AI

The MRC LID Guidance and Declaration note that applicants must not use AI. This is because we are not trying to select AI as doctoral candidates, but intelligent, creative and driven individuals with a bright research future. Assessors want to see each applicant's potential for independent, good quality research.

Where use of AI is discovered – e.g., where references don't exist and have clearly been hallucinated - applications become ineligible for our scheme.

Even where schemes allow the use of AI, applicants should be aware of the limitations of using AI. It may provide a high-level summary of research previous conducted, but it can also provide incorrect responses and it cannot provide independent thought. And, where use is obvious, it can leave assessors uncertain about the extent to which they are evaluating the student's own work or AI-generated content. This ultimately works against an applicant, as it may give the impression that they are unable to write the application independently.)

Poor or unsuitable research project proposal

Submitting a research project proposal is an essential part of the MRC LID Studentship application. It is a proposal of the work to be undertaken for the duration of their PhD and funding written up by the applicant in their own words.

The research proposal is used to make an assessment on an applicant's critical thinking skills, their understanding of the relevant research area and of the demands of a research degree.

Contact with prospective supervisory teams

We ask applicants to contact their proposed supervisory team because we believe that this is an essential part of the research degree application process, and the support academic staff provide is invaluable. Applicants who choose not to contact the supervisory team may disadvantage themselves and can occasionally make their own application ineligible.



The research project proposal must not be written by the proposed supervisory team. However, once an applicant has a first draft, they may ask the team to review it and provide some guidance (if they have enough time to do so before the studentship application deadline).

Contacting supervisory teams, and expecting them to give of their time, without having done the preparatory background work of

- reading through the project details, and
- watching the recording provided, and
- reading the additional information via links provided (DOIs), and
- preparing a first draft of their proposal (even if only very roughly)

does not give a good first impression of an applicant.

Likewise, contacting the supervisory team in the days leading up to the deadline, without giving them enough time to review a draft or to respond, can make this step more difficult.

Academic writing

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) expect applicants to meet a minimum standard of academic writing required for postgraduate research study. MRC LID panellists have noted that some candidates have insufficient understanding of the format and quality of writing required for study at this stage. The MRC LID Board has put in place steps to mitigate against bias towards applicants who've had experience of UK education in our overall review. However, there remains a minimum standard which must be met. Applicants should take advantage of any support and help they can to review their writing (for example, with their undergraduate institution) and/or do their own reading on this. MRC LID has provided 10 examples from past students for applicants to read. (Although some of these will not cover all of the criteria outlined in the guidance (mainly around formatting), they show the level and style of writing required.)

Those who write impenetrably or vaguely about what they intend to do will score poorly. It is important that this document is written clearly so that a non-specialist reviewer can understand what the aims of the research are and how they will be implemented.

Scope

Applicants are provided with all the details required for a good application, including

- Clear guidance about information required in a research proposal (under the 'What is a research proposal' section of our Applicant Guidance & FAQs document). The research proposal should cover each of the areas outlined as these are scored in our rubric. The sections should provide more detail and depth than the advertised project text (for example, research methods should be explained rather than stated as a list of objectives).
- An indication of length. Applicants should aim to write enough detail into their project proposal that their word count is just below (but does not exceed) the maximum word limit. (This is a test of good writing, requiring an applicant to write succinctly and well in order to cover all sections suitably. Applicants will likely need to review and redraft their research proposal several times to cover the information and fit within the requirements.)



- A list of research projects available under this scheme for this year's funding. The projects advertised each provide an outline of potential research available and applicants are asked to expand on the information provided for this task.

Submission of alternative documents

MRC LID cannot accept alternative documents where these have been submitted instead of a research proposal. The most common alternatives received are a covering letter, personal statement, statement of purpose, or a copy of the advertised project. These applications are immediately and automatically ineligible. They will not be reviewed.

Also, if an applicant

- (a) does not submit a research proposal, or
- (b) submits a research proposal for a project they are interested in but which has not been [advertised by MRC LID](#), or
- (c) submits a summary of research they have undertaken previously, or
- (d) resubmits the advert text (even if slightly edited)

the MRC LID is unable to consider their application. In these instances, the applicant has made their application ineligible for consideration for MRC LID funding.

Competition for available funding

MRC LID offers studentships from MRC/UKRI funding. This funding is cash limited to a maximum award number each year, and has some recruitment conditions attached. These details are set out in the [Applicant Guidance & FAQs](#) documents.

The MRC LID Studentship scheme is extremely competitive. This means that many very good applicants will be disappointed.

Other potential reasons

Some other common reasons why applications may be unsuccessful or marked less well.

Full potential not clear

Recipients of MRC LID Studentships are likely to be those applicants who provide a coherent and complete application where their full potential and academic/career trajectory is demonstrated clearly and aligns with the particular project they have selected.

Applicants should be strategic, applying only for funding and/or projects that are closely linked to their skill set and trajectory. A good applicant who has chosen a project which appears to be an unsuitable or incompatible fit will not be successful. If the assessors cannot see a link between an applicant's work to date and their application then it is up to the applicant to articulate why they have chosen that project and to make the link to their specific situations, skills and career path clear. (Noting a passion for a topic is not sufficient proof of motivation or potential for doctoral study applications.)

Absence of full details about any aspect of a candidate's academic study and /or career can make it difficult for the selection panels to properly consider an application. If there are reasons why a candidate has not scored particularly well in part of their academic career, it



is important that these are explained in the appropriate sections of the application form, so that this information can be taken into consideration.

When differentiating between closely matched applications, the selection panels use all of the information provided by candidates on their application forms. Where candidates have provided no additional information (where this might be appropriate), this may not be to their advantage.

Understanding of postgraduate research

Postgraduate research degree study differs significantly from taught programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate). Submitting an application which does not show some understanding of what research degree studies entail shows that an applicant has not taken the time to find out more about postgraduate doctoral study. This can suggest a lack of interest, preparation and awareness about what the applicant is applying for. This may make it difficult to assess an individual's suitability for this programme.

If an applicant has no experience or understanding of postgraduate research degree study in the UK they should do some suitable online research or speak to someone for advice (for example, a personal tutor if they are currently undertaking undergraduate study).

Plagiarism

Over the DTP recruitment, there have been some instances of plagiarism and other assessment irregularities (collusion; personation; fraud; cheating) observed in some applications. This is considered to be a form of academic misconduct.

Applicants must ensure that their application documents do not stray into this area by acknowledging and referencing other people's work (or their own past work) appropriately, referencing any source material, and using appropriate punctuation and a recognised citation system.

Additional information

MRC LID has a complex review process which includes multiple independent scoring stages (both by specialist and non-expert reviewers from both partner institutions) using two different scoring systems. This is followed by MRC LID Board discussions and meetings to review all application scores, and re-review those where there is a disparity across the scoring and/or where a further review is requested, ahead of selecting applications for interview. This scheme has been created to ensure that the potential for bias or exclusion is limited, given the number of stages, the variety of options, and the number of reviewers.

The decisions of the MRC LID Board are final and non-negotiable.