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## **Guidelines on Becoming a PhD student in the Department of Sociology**

**Applying for admission as a doctoral student in Sociology may seem quite a daunting process. These notes are offered as practical guidelines for prospective students. They do not replace the official rules and regulations (as laid out in UCT's official handbooks on General Rules and Policies (Handbook 3) and the Humanities Faculty's Postgraduate Studies Student Handbook (9b).**

### **Obtaining a PhD in Sociology at UCT**

The Sociology Department has about 35 students studying for PhDs, making it one of the bigger PhD programmes in the university. The Humanities Faculty at UCT does not offer American-style coursework-based PhD programmes. Our PhDs are by research only (although sometimes we will ask or require PhD students to take specific Masters- or Honours-level courses to improve their skills in relevant fields). PhD students work on diverse topics in sociology, industrial sociology, the sociology of development, and the sociology of diversity. Many students work in research groups led by one of the professors or lecturers in the department or linked to research centres such as the Centre for Social Science Research. Other students work on very individual topics. A list of current students and topics is available from the department.

Because there are less than fifteen professors and lecturers in the department, a major constraint on our ability to accept additional students is the availability of someone willing and able to supervise a student's research. Sometimes a good student applies, with sensible proposals, but we are unable to find an appropriate supervisor and therefore cannot accept the student. A student is much more likely to be accepted to study for a PhD if he or she proposes to work on a topic that is closely aligned to an existing research group or research centre, or to the personal research interests of one or more of the professors or lecturers in the department. Professors' and lecturers' research interests are listed on the website.

Writing a PhD is a challenge and should not be taken on without careful thought. Many students perform well in coursework degrees at Honours and even Masters level, where their work entails primarily the critical appraisal of secondary literatures, in a structured environment, but then struggle at the PhD level, where they must more independently design and research their own research topic. It is especially difficult to research and write a PhD whilst either working or child-raising full-time. Research and writing usually require extended periods of full-time engagement and concentration. Writing a PhD can also be a stressful experience. Before embarking on a PhD, prospective students should discuss the challenges with other students who have recently completed or are currently completing their PhDs.

Prospective students might also like to read a book such as Patrick Dunleavy's *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation* (Palgrave, 2003).

### **Minimum admission requirements**

You need to be academically very well prepared to be admitted as a PhD student. This usually means having at least a good Master's degree in Sociology (or an acceptable alternative social science discipline) and proven competence as an independent social researcher. A good research Master's degree (i.e. a degree completed by dissertation only, without coursework) usually fulfils these requirements. Alternatively, a Master's by coursework and dissertation may be acceptable if both the overall mark and the dissertation mark are very good, that is at least 70%. These minimum requirements do not guarantee admission.

These entrance requirements are sometimes relaxed for „mature“ students, i.e. students who are older and have been out of the university world for some time. In such cases, we look for other evidence that the applicant is motivated and capable of completing a doctorate.

Students are sometimes admitted to study for a research Master's degree with the possibility of a later change of registration to a PhD. This will be appropriate in the cases of students where there is initially some uncertainty over their capability. A change of registration to PhD will only be approved if the student has demonstrated clearly that they are capable of completing successfully the PhD.

### **The application and admission procedure**

The admission of students to study for a PhD entails three stages:

1. A preliminary stage to ascertain whether there is a fit between the student's interests and the department.
2. The formal application.
3. Transfer from provisional to full registration.

#### **First stage: Preliminary inquiries**

The first thing to do is to visit the Department's website (<http://www.sociology.uct.ac.za/staff/list/>) and look at the profiles of the academic members of the Department: their research interests, publications, and so on. You should note also that other UCT Departments have scholars with skills and interests overlapping with the Sociology Department's (for example, the African Gender Institute, the Institute of Criminology, and the Department of Social Anthropology). Sometimes the most appropriate supervisor and institutional fit for a student will be outside of the Sociology Department.

Before you submit a formal application, we need to look at your curriculum vitae and a preliminary concept paper of 2-3 pages (maximum 1000 words), indicating in general terms your proposed area of research. If you have identified one or more possible supervisors in the Department, you should indicate this. You might then be referred to a potential supervisor for further discussion. This step is important because the Department of Sociology will only take on a new doctoral student if that person has met the academic requirements and there is an appropriate supervisor within the Department who is both qualified, available and willing to provide the necessary supervision. Even if there is a qualified supervisor in the student's proposed field of research, he or she might not be available or willing to supervise. If none of the professors or lecturers in the department is

qualified, available and willing to serve as supervisor, then the Department will not admit the student. It is at this point, therefore, that the Postgraduate Administrator, on behalf of the Department's Postgraduate Committee, will advise you whether or not to proceed with your application.

During this stage you should communicate with the Postgraduate Administrator in the Sociology Department, Susan Walker. Her email is [susan.walker@uct.ac.za](mailto:susan.walker@uct.ac.za). You may also communicate directly with other professors or lecturers who are possible supervisors.

### **Second stage: Formal application**

Once you have established that the Department of Sociology will consider your formal application, you should proceed with applying formally for admission. Formal applications are now done online, on: <http://applyonline.uct.ac.za>

For general information on applying to UCT to study as a postgraduate, see: <http://www.uct.ac.za/apply/applications/postgraduates/>

For any queries with your online application, please contact the Admissions Office on (021) 650 2128 - one of the staff members will be able to talk you through the process.

For your formal online application, you will need:

- a short proposal: this should be 6 to 8 pages or 2-3000 words in length; it should indicate clearly and succinctly (1) what you propose to research, (2) how you propose to research it, and (3) why this will be a significant contribution to one or other branch of sociology, including with respect to the existing literature. This is not a binding commitment on your part: if you are admitted, then we expect that the design of your thesis will evolve. But you must demonstrate the basic coherence of your proposed thesis topic.
- If you are not a UCT graduate, we need a copy of your academic transcript, a writing sample and the university contact details of two referees who are familiar with your postgraduate academic work; the writing sample should provide evidence of your academic – preferably sociological – writing ability and your command of research methods; your Master's dissertation would best serve this purpose.

These documents go to our department's Postgraduate Committee for its consideration.

### **Third stage: Transfer from provisional to full registration or from MPhil to PhD status**

If accepted, a student might be registered for either (1) full PhD registration, (2) provisional PhD registration or (3) MPhil registration. Students will usually be required to register provisionally for a PhD, and will transfer to full registration only when the Department is satisfied with the student's progress. Students who are not UCT Master's graduates may be required to register as MPhil students at first. In such cases, the registration will be changed to PhD once the Department is satisfied with the student's progress. Students should register before the first of May in the first year of doctoral study.

Students who are registered provisionally for a PhD are expected to spend their first six months developing, under supervision, their research proposal. To assist new students with provisional registration, the Department endeavours to hold an „induction“ session for new PhD students and their supervisors during the first semester, to discuss the requirements of a full proposal. New students are required to attend. Supervisors are expected to attend, unless they have attended an induction session in the recent past. Students are sometimes

required or advised to take appropriate Masters- or even Honours-level courses to help their preparations.

After six months, or earlier if you and your supervisor agree that the proposal is ready, you will be required to submit a full proposal and present it at a Departmental seminar. This full proposal should be approximately 20 pages (6-8000 words) in length. The full proposal should include:

1. A solid engagement with the relevant existing literature(s), explaining the prospective contribution of the proposed research;
2. A description of your methodology, demonstrating the practicality of the research. If the research entails fieldwork, and when this is feasible, it is recommended that the student demonstrates the practicality of the proposed research by showing that he/she has already been into the field, even if only briefly. We generally advise students against attempting to conduct an original survey to collect a large n of quantitative data; we recommend instead that students conducting empirical research use existing survey data (using one of the many under-analysed datasets that are available) and/or conduct qualitative research. Any student conducting empirical research needs to consider carefully their sample and their selection of study sites.
3. A full and clear account of what precisely you will be researching, including an indication of what you expect to find (if appropriate). Sometimes it is appropriate to set out one or more clear research questions, or hypotheses to be tested, in which case you might discuss the dependent and independent variables that are relevant to your topic. It is always important to demonstrate that you have a preliminary familiarity with the topic, and (where appropriate) that you can draw on preliminary fieldwork as well as research using existing literatures. For example, if you propose to conduct interviews with a set of informants, you should have done a pilot interview; or, if you propose to do ethnographic research in a particular setting, you should (if feasible) have visited the research site.
4. Students need to demonstrate that their methodological choices are appropriate to their substantive claims or objectives (and vice versa). For example, some general claims require analysing a representative sample of cases. If a student employs a largely or exclusively qualitative research design with a purposive or convenience sample of interviewees, then it is unlikely that he or she will be able to make general claims. Students using qualitative research methods need to recognize that the value of these methods lies primarily in understanding the nuances of meaning and understanding, and how these affect behaviour.
5. Students need to think through the ethical aspects of their proposed research, especially when students are proposing more qualitative research that entails more intensive interactions between the researcher and the research participants or subjects. Students need to consider issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, the researcher's responsibilities to research participants during and after the research process, and the relationship (if any) between the researcher and any organisations involved in any way.
6. A prospective chapter outline, i.e. setting out what you imagine the different chapters of your thesis will cover. Too many students set out a chapter outline in which the findings will be reported in a single chapter, unhelpfully titled "findings". A PhD thesis generally requires at least three substantive chapters; anything less looks like a Master's thesis, not a PhD thesis. Your chapter outline should therefore set out what you anticipate, at this stage, these three or more substantive chapters will cover. You might think of these chapters as answering different sub-questions that together address your overall research question. The Department recognises that the proposed structure cannot and should not be viewed as a binding commitment,

because the organisation of a thesis may change as the research progresses. The purpose of requiring a full chapter outline is to ensure that the student has thought about the topic enough to be able to provide some level of detail on the anticipated content of the thesis.

7. A timetable of what you will do, semester-by-semester, showing not only when different stages of research will be completed but also when successive chapters will be written and revised; the Department encourages strongly students to envisage submitting chapters of their theses to journals even prior to completion of the PhD.
8. A one-page summary or abstract.

The full proposal is not intended to demonstrate that you have done an exhaustive literature review: you will continue to engage with the existing literature as you continue with your PhD research. It is intended to demonstrate the coherence of your planning. Above all, there must be some coherence to your proposal: your research question, literature review, methodology, and sub-questions / likely chapter outline must all be in alignment with each other.

In summary, the full proposal should demonstrate clearly that the student has a clear vision and understanding of the proposed research, and of its prospective contribution to the relevant literature(s). Students are now required to complete a checklist confirming that their proposal addresses all of the issues above. A student's proposal will not be considered until it has addressed all of these issues.

Full proposals must be submitted to the departmental postgraduate administrator at least one week before the departmental seminar, to allow them to be circulated. Each proposal will be assigned to one or two members of the department (other than the supervisor or supervisors) to read thoroughly. At the seminar itself, the student will make a short, summary presentation, but most time is set aside for discussion. The formal presentation of a full proposal at a departmental seminar is important not only to allow the Department to assess the proposed research, but also because it provides an opportunity to elicit comments and questions that may be incorporated in a final revision of the full proposal. Other PhD students are required to attend proposal presentations, and you will be required to attend other students' presentations. This gives students an opportunity to learn from each other.

The Department has a number of options following on a student's presentation of his or her proposal. Usually, responsibility for formulating the appropriate decision and motivation is delegated to the PhD Convenor, who consults with other members of the Department as appropriate. If necessary, the Head of Department will appoint a sub-committee to discuss and make a decision. The options open to the Department include:

1. approve the proposal with minimal or no changes, and recommend full PhD registration;
2. require more substantial changes, to the satisfaction of the supervisor, without any need to circulate the revised proposal within the Department;
3. require more substantial changes, and require that the revised proposal be circulated within the Department prior to approval;
4. require thorough revisions, and that the student presents the revised proposal to the Department;
5. recommend that the student completes his or her studies at the MPhil level; or
6. advise that the student's registration should be terminated.

The Department can also require that students take one or other of the courses offered in the department, including either methodological or thematic courses.

After a student's full proposal has been approved, the appropriate faculty form must be completed by the student and supervisor, and counter-signed by the Head of Department or

PhD Convenor. This is then submitted via the Faculty Research Committee to the University's Doctoral Degrees Board for its approval.

Students who are registered provisionally for an MPhil must undergo to the same procedure before re-registration as a PhD student, but they are not required to do so within 6 months of initial registration.

### **Dispute procedures**

The transition from provisional to full registration is an important step. The Department will not approve of a student's change to full registration unless the student has demonstrated that he or she is making adequate progress. On occasion, disputes arise over the progress that students are making.

In some cases, a dispute may arise between a PhD student and his or her supervisor. The student might feel that his or her proposal is satisfactory, but the supervisor is not satisfied. In such cases, either the student or the supervisor should inform the PhD convenor and Head of Department. The next step is that the proposal will be reviewed by another member of the Department, appointed by the Head of Department; in some cases, this will be the PhD convenor; in other cases, another member of the Department will be more appropriate. The student, supervisor and reviewer will then sit down together and try to establish some consensus over the strengths and shortcomings of the draft proposal, and the changes that need to be made to satisfy the Department. The purpose of this is remedial. If the reviewer and supervisor agree, but the student dissents, then the student is entitled to submit the draft proposal to the faculty. In practice, however, it is very unlikely that the faculty (and Doctoral Degrees Board) will approve a proposal that has not satisfied the Department. If the reviewer and supervisor do not agree, then the proposal will be sent to a full Review Committee, as set out in the next paragraph.

In cases where the supervisor and PhD convenor (or other reviewer) do not concur, a full Review Committee will be constituted. This might be because the supervisor is satisfied with a student's draft proposal, but the reviewer is not, or because the reviewer is satisfied but the supervisor is not. In these cases, the Head of Department will appoint a Review Committee comprising four reviewers, at least one and sometimes two of whom will be external to the department, in addition to the Head of Department him- or herself. The Review Committee will examine the draft proposal and assess it in comparison to the criteria set out above. The Review Committee may decide to consult with the supervisor and first reviewer so as to understand their assessments. The Review Committee's decision will be communicated to the faculty and Doctoral Degrees Board.

### **Annual reregistration**

In your first year and every subsequent year as a registered student, you will need to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with your supervisor. This memorandum, which is co-signed by the Head of Department, spells out mutual expectations and it schedules a programme for research and writing in the year ahead. Annual renewal of registration requires acceptable progress in the previous year; supervisors are required to endorse a student's progress as satisfactory before reregistration is permitted; if satisfactory progress has not been made, the student's registration will be terminated.

The MOU also requires that the student and supervisor record that appropriate attention has been paid to ethical issues. It is the supervisor's responsibility to discuss with the student any ethical issues arising, or likely to arise, in the student's research. The supervisor may invite other students or academic staff to participate in a broader discussion of ethical aspects of any student's research. If the PhD convenor or Head of Department think that a

student's research requires such broader discussion, the supervisor and student might be required to participate. The HoD, in signing off on the MOU, is confirming that he or she is satisfied that due attention has been paid to ethical issues.

Students will be required to attend PhD proposal presentations and dedicated sessions on, for example, research ethics. Students may be required to attend departmental seminars.

### **Publication**

PhD students are encouraged strongly to present their work at seminars and conferences, and to submit their work for publication in working paper series and/or academic journals. This provides students with an opportunity to solicit comments and criticisms on their work-in-progress, and thus improve the quality of their work, as well as to stake some „ownership“ of their original scholarship.

This is one reason why it is usually helpful to conceptualise and plan a PhD thesis as comprising a core of at least three chapters that report original research and which have some discrete value on their own as well as parts of the thesis as a whole. Ideally, each of these chapters might be presented at seminars or conferences, and submitted for publication, prior to the completion and submission of the thesis as a whole.

### **Teaching experience**

As a Doctoral student you may be asked (and appropriately paid) to lecture a small part of an undergraduate course. You may also have the opportunity to be employed as a tutor.

### **Additional notes**

*Residence requirements:* In general we expect that a prospective applicant will have planned and budgeted to be based at UCT during her or his studies. The PhD is not offered as a „distance learning“ degree. Although research may necessitate periods of absence, UCT usually remains the doctoral student's base and you are expected to stay in Cape Town. Being part of a university environment, attending seminars, and interacting with other students is a crucial component of the PhD experience. In exceptional cases, however, the Department may accept a PhD student whose primary residence is away from Cape Town. If a student applies to study for a PhD whilst being primarily resident outside Cape Town, the Department will probably require that the student commits to regular visits to Cape Town for face-to-face meetings with the supervisor, to extended visits to UCT in the first year of registration (to complete the proposal) and towards the end (to complete the thesis), and to regular communication with the supervisor through email and skype. Failure to maintain regular communication could lead to deregistration. Applicants are advised also that professors and lecturers may not be willing to supervise a student who proposes to be resident outside of Cape Town.

*Accommodation:* The Department of Sociology is unable to offer or arrange accommodation for students.

*Financial Support:* There are only very limited possibilities of receiving financial support. The Department of Sociology does not administer student funds and you should contact UCT's Postgraduate Funding Office about scholarships and bursaries. Sometimes research units recruit students under paid research contracts and some doctoral students may be attached to a specific research project and receive financial support through the project director. Such an arrangement usually would be initiated by the project or research centre director and not by the Department.

*Information on fees:* see the [Fees Handbook 2024](#)

*Information and details on funding* [Financial Assistance for Postgrad & Postdoctoral research handbook 2024](#)

*Humanities course information* [Humanities Faculty Handbook 2024](#)

**UCT Links and contacts:**

Department of Sociology: <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/sociology>  
[soc-sociology@uct.ac.za](mailto:soc-sociology@uct.ac.za)

Faculty of Humanities Postgraduate Office:  
[hum-postgrad@uct.ac.za](mailto:hum-postgrad@uct.ac.za)

Postgraduate Funding Office:  
[pgfunding@uct.ac.za](mailto:pgfunding@uct.ac.za)