

Doing a PhD: What is it all about?

I am now going into year 2 as a part-time NWCDTP PhD student in Linguistics at Lancaster. As I am 50% part time, I have 6 years as opposed to 3 years to complete my studies. However, I believe you can also apply to study on a 75% basis too. Other options could well of course be available!

When I started my PhD, I realised that I had very little idea as to what it would entail. Therefore, I thought it might be useful to reflect on my experiences so far to hopefully help others. Of course, everyone's experiences will be different so I can only talk about my own personal experiences and the expectations of my institution.

Application

I thought it would be best to start at the beginning! I became interested in undertaking a PhD during my Masters. However, due to personal reasons I wasn't able to look into options at that point. A couple of years later, in 2021, I contacted two potential supervisors at Lancaster who were fantastic and whose advice was invaluable. This would be a key tip for anyone applying: get in touch with the academics you are interested in working with in advance! They have so much experience and can advise you about the different aspects of the application. The main points take-aways for me from this meeting were:

Funding: we discussed several options but agreed that given my research interests, the AHRC through the NWCDTP would be the best option for me. This was because of the pathways the NWCDTP supports, the interdisciplinary nature of my research (linguistics/history), and my focus on the north-west of England.

Work experience: I had been working for the best part of 20 years when I applied to do my PhD. Yet initially, my focus was 100% on my research and it didn't really occur to me to include the important skills that I had developed from my working life. I sent one of my supervisors my CV and she highlighted the importance of including my project management skills in my application. In addition, we agreed to explore the idea of applying to the Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA), given my experience in establishing and managing relationships over several different professional projects. I would strongly advise other applicants to think carefully about the skills you have from outside of academia that you could bring to undertaking a PhD.

Research Focus: one of the biggest challenges for me was to articulate my research idea within the strict word limits. As these limits also include the reference list, you need to be incredibly selective about the sources you include. The meeting with my supervisors was again invaluable in this regard!

I have included further details about how I approached applying for my CDA in the [short video](#) I created for the NWCDTP.

Induction and university requirements

Induction: one of the very first things I did when I started by PhD was attend the NWCDTP induction session at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. This was a very useful session and I am really glad I went! Not only did I get to meet key contacts at the NWCDTP but I also met my fellow students from all across the DTP. I have often seen many of these students at subsequent events and it's nice to have a feeling of community. The sessions at the induction day were also very helpful including one that included writing tips.

Supervisions: In terms of the formal university requirements, I need to ensure that I meet with at least one of my supervisors every month or so. This is quite flexible and can be in-person or online. It's a great opportunity to ask questions and highlight the activities I have been involved with. Sometimes I do have the "wobbles", where I think there is no way I can ever do a PhD, but my supervisors are incredibly supportive and I always come out of my supervisions feeling a lot more positive and with some definitive actions for my next steps.

Pre-confirmation panel: In my first year also needed to undertake a "pre-confirmation panel". Other departments at my institution call this an "Appraisal" but it is the same thing. This panel was essentially a discussion between myself and another member of staff from my department who was not part of my supervisory team. I had to prepare a 5000 word literature review and a four-page research outline in advance of the panel. Although this was formal requirement, the panel itself was quite informal and it was incredibly useful to get a different perspective on my work and think about some of the questions posed.

Confirmation panel: this is a significant milestone to confirm you as a PhD student. Mine is likely to take place in early 2026 as I have recently had a period of intercalation (put my studies on hold for a few months). For this panel, I will need to prepare a 10,000 - 12,000 word document on methods which I will then discuss with someone outside of my supervisory team. Please wish me luck!

Post-confirmation panel: I think this panel again takes the form of a conversation with a member of staff outside of my supervisory team and it is to ensure that the timetable for completion of your PhD is viable.

Ethics: Another big tip I would give to those just starting their PhD is to check whether you need ethics approval for your data collection. I think it took around 5 months for my approval to be finalised so I would strongly suggest exploring whether you need to do this as early as possible. The form that I needed to fill in wasn't overly complicated but it did ask some in-depth questions and really made me think about my research from several different perspectives. I must admit, I found this process very useful. Please don't be afraid to reach out to your university's Library, Research Ethics and Information Governance teams in advance of submitting your application. My colleagues here at Lancaster were more than happy to sit down with me to run through any queries I had. This made writing the application much easier and I am very grateful for their support.

Other opportunities

Doing a PhD is about more than writing the thesis! It is whole experience and the NWCDTP offers funding for an impressive [range of opportunities](#). I would strongly suggest exploring these as soon as possible but of course there is no pressure to undertake them. I have included a brief outline of the activities I have been involved with via my university and the NWCDTP.

Research Group meetings: my department is really good at bringing students together. We meet every week in term time for an invited talk, informal catch-ups, and even had a trip to a local ice-cream shop!

Conferences: In my first year of my PhD I attended the UK Language and Variation Conference in Edinburgh. Although I wasn't in a position to present, it was such a great experience to meet leading academics in the field and listen to some fascinating presentations. Lancaster is hosting this conference in September 2025 and I am looking forward to it already. In summer

2024, I attended the NWCDTP PG conference at Keele University where I presented my research and acted as a session chair. The following week, I attended the Northern Englishes Workshop in Chester. It was great to see some familiar faces at both of these events!

I then travelled by train to Vienna for the International Conference on Language Variation in Europe (ICLaVE), which is the largest conference on language variation in Europe. I was honestly blown away by the number of talks on offer! This was my first experience of presenting a poster. I was really grateful for the level of interest shown in my work, the number of positive comments, and the advice I received. I have written more about this event in a separate blog and huge thanks to the NWCDTP for supporting me financially to attend this event.

Specialist Training: In December 2024, the NWCDTP also supported me to attend the “Introduction to Oral History” course run by National Life Stories at the British Library in London. This was a whole-day, face-to-face event which covered a wide range of different aspects relating to undertaking oral history interviews. This training was critical for me as my own data collection will follow oral history methods. I have created a separate blog about this, which includes further details of this training.

I hope this blog has been useful and I am more than happy to answer any questions:

p.forster@lancaster.ac.uk