

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies

Further information for postgraduate research students 2020

The Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS) at The Open University is offering full-time funded PhD studentships to outstanding applicants who are interested in studying in an environment that supports world-leading quality research. In the last Research Excellence Framework (REF 2014) the UK government endorsed our research as overwhelmingly world-leading and internationally excellent, with significant and wide-reaching impact.

Students who are awarded a fully-funded studentship receive a tax-free bursary covering three years of study. In line with Research Council norms, the anticipated stipend for fully-funded studentships for 2020/21 is expected to be approximately £14900. Funded students also receive an annual research training and support grant (currently up to £1000).

Students are expected to live in or within easy reach of Milton Keynes, to attend the university on a regular basis and fully engage with the research environment. If there are exceptional circumstances, an application for a residency waiver can be made to enable students to live further away. However, the expectation to fully engage with the research environment remains.

Studentships are offered across the different areas of the faculty:

- The School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sports (ECYS)
- The School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care (HWSC)
- The School of Languages and Applied Linguistics (LAL)
- The Institute of Educational Technology (IET).

Although students are part of a school/unit, they are located together as one community of WELS postgraduate research students. The successful applicants will join this vibrant international community of students who are engaged in interdisciplinary research in education, education technology, languages (including applied linguistics and translation studies), and health and social care.

Person specification

Applicants need to have the following qualifications, experience and expertise:

- A good degree at 2.1 level or above relevant to the area in which they are applying or a Master's degree in a relevant area
- Knowledge of and experience of using qualitative/quantitative research methods
- Good written and spoken communication skills. All non-native English candidates need to demonstrate a minimum IELTS score of 6.5 with no less than 6.0 in any of the four categories (or approved equivalent). You should have your level of proficiency certified through a provider approved by UK Visas and Immigration and provide your certificate and grade with your application.
- The ability to work collaboratively with supervisors
- The ability to work independently and manage time effectively to ensure completion within the funded period
- The commitment to disseminating research findings
- If you are applying from outside of the EEA (European Economic Area) further details of the requirements for entry to the UK as a postgraduate research student can be found [here](#).

Support while you are studying

Each student is allocated a minimum of two supervisors, usually from within the Faculty. We also support students in many other different ways including from the Director of Postgraduate Studies (who has overall responsibility for research students in the faculty), and a Third Party Monitor. Support is also available more widely across the university through the OU Graduate School, the Library, the careers development team and other units as required. It is expected that full-time students complete their studies within the funded period of three years and all students are supported to achieve this.

Students have access to excellent library services and IT training. They will be provided with a programme of academic training and skills development, which includes

university-wide as well as faculty-based seminars and workshops. This includes resources and training offered through the Graduate School Network which draws on the OU's world class expertise in pedagogy to support your development as a research student.

For full-time funded students there is an expectation that the University will be the physical and conceptual centre of their research work for most of the time. There is some flexibility at times when students are collecting data and in the final stages of writing up. However, students are expected to be in Walton Hall on a regular basis during their studies.

Fees and studentships

Students who are successful in gaining a funded studentship receive a maintenance grant. This is currently being finalised but we anticipate it will be approximately £14900 (£14,777 in 2019/20). This is likely to stay at a similar level with the possibility of a small inflationary rise. The university allows holders of full-time student grants to engage in 6 hours paid work per week (not cumulative) over and above their studies.

Further information about studying for a research degree at the OU is available in the Research Degrees Prospectus which may be accessed online at:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/research-degrees>

The application process

To apply for a place to study for an MPhil/PhD in the faculty you will need to complete and send us an application form and a research proposal. The application form can be found at <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/research-degrees/how-to-apply/mphil-and-phd-application-process> You will be required to provide the names of two referees who can support your application; at least one referee must be able to comment on your most recent studies.

Applicants must also submit a research proposal of 2,000 words explaining the nature of their interest in the subject, with details of any previous work in this area or any related areas. The proposal is an important part of your application in which you outline your research, including the proposed methodology. Information about how to write a proposal is given at the end of this document.

The closing date for applications is the 5.00 pm on 31st January 2020. All applicants will receive an email notifying them of the outcome of their application. Shortlisted applicants will be invited for interview during March. If you have any queries about the studentships prior to applying, please contact the Director of Postgraduate Studies, Professor Jan Draper at wels-student-enquiries@open.ac.uk. Please send completed applications to wels-student-enquiries@open.ac.uk

Selection process

If you are shortlisted, we will contact you by email to arrange an interview date. For international applicants, interviews will be held by Skype. We anticipate that the interview panel will consist of the Director of Postgraduate Studies, the relevant Postgraduate Convenor and usually one or two members of academic staff with expertise in your chosen field. Interview questions are based on your application and previous training in research methods, and your research proposal.

Applicants are requested to bring certificates for their current qualifications and a valid passport or alternative documentation to confirm their identity.

Your research proposal and interview performance are evaluated according to the following criteria:

- The fit of your project with the research themes in the faculty
- Your knowledge of the subject including, for example, knowledge of theoretical and recent literature relevant to your proposed research area
- The rationale for your proposal and the relationship between the research question(s), research design and the proposed method of analysis
- Your knowledge and understanding of these proposed research methods and the rationale for your choice of methods in comparison with alternatives
- The feasibility of the project design and viability within the registration period
- Your knowledge and understanding of the ethical considerations
- Your written and verbal communication skills
- Your understanding of what is involved in undertaking a PhD.

Topic areas for studentships

Your research needs to align with the strategic research priorities of the university and you are strongly advised to make yourself familiar with our research while preparing your research proposal (see <http://wels.open.ac.uk/research> and <https://iet.open.ac.uk/research>) Research in the faculty takes place under the following broad themes:

1. Children, young people and families

Research in children, young people and families at WELS is at the vanguard of contemporary thinking in the field. Our research encompasses children's and young people's experiences, thinking, representations, learning, development, inclusion and social participation. Of concern are the institutions and social practices that shape their lives, and the cultural and personal constructions of childhood and youth that mediate these processes. We draw on a range of approaches and research methodologies, including developmental psychology, childhood studies, sociology, education, anthropology, ethnography, as well as cultural studies, and cultural psychology.

Collectively, scholars in this group have significantly reappraised key questions such as 'what is a child' and 'what is a good childhood' in the context of growing social inequalities between children in different geographic locations. Amongst the important themes of our work are the challenges of poverty and abuse as experienced by children and young people beyond the UK. This work is particularly concerned with how theoretical insights can be applied at policy level and how this can have a beneficial impact on children's lives.

Research priorities reflect the diversity of childhoods (for example, in relation to social, economic and cultural contexts) and the diversity of children's lived experiences (for example, in relation to age, gender, parenting/family experiences, abilities, disabilities and mental health).

2. Health, wellbeing and social care

Researchers in this theme use pioneering inclusive research methodologies to enable people to articulate complex experiences of health and illness, empower patient groups and transform perceptions of disability. Our research on ageing focuses on the

changing cultural, economic, social and environmental circumstances in which people thrive in older age. We use ethnographic approaches to focus on end-of-life care, death, bereavement, and memorialisation and participatory and social history approaches to research the experience of people with learning difficulties. Our research into reproduction, sexualities and sexual health is concerned not only with prevention of infection, conception, violence or risk, but also with sexual and reproductive autonomy, pleasure and intimacy. A newly emerging area is research in sport and fitness, examining issues as diverse as the performance of elite athletes, the rehabilitation of sports professionals, and women's sporting embodiment.

Health, wellbeing and social care research in WELS is committed to co-production and knowledge exchange. This involves us in partnership with charities, universities, service user and provider organisations. We host various cross-sector alliances and research hubs including the Carer Research and Knowledge Exchange Network (CAREN), the Black Women's Health & Wellbeing Research Network and the Sexuality Alliance, a multi-agency collaboration to promote sexual health and rights for young people with life-limiting conditions.

3. Languages and literacies

Language is a powerful tool for constructing knowledge and social identities and crucial in everyday contexts as well as in professional practices. Our languages both reflect and shape our understanding of the world, our cultures, our relationships, our thinking and our identities.

Research in this theme explores notions such as intercultural communication, translation, and translanguaging, to better grasp a world which is characterized by diversity, multilingualism, mobility and diasporic identities. Our work also focuses on literacy, aiming to understand the creativity of literacy practices across the online-offline divide. We carry out research into digital literacy to ensure that people today (including teachers and learners) can use new technologies judiciously and critically.

Researchers in our faculty focus on the use of languages in our contemporary working lives and practices, for example, field-leading professional literacies research examines writing in social work. Language teaching across the globe is at the centre of our Developing Online Teaching Skills work which focuses on the real life needs and ideals of language teachers, bringing together critical digital literacy with continuing professional development.

Translation research encompasses interdisciplinary aspects such as translation psychology and affective aspects of cross-cultural mediation, the use of digital tools to support translators and interpreters, as well as other aspects linked to communicating across cultures. Our work also offers important insights into the use of English as an academic lingua franca and a medium of instruction in education internationally and how this links with issues of social justice and inequality.

4. Transformative education

WELS research results in transformative educational experiences. Our signature expertise concerns the development of inclusive, [research rich pedagogies](#) which are shaping visions of education and enabling all learners to realise their full potential and enrich their learning journeys. In the context of our multiple award-winning participatory programmes of international teacher education, we have developed pedagogies of mutuality, and models of sustainable change, that are providing innovative solutions, at scale, to the challenges the global community faces in promoting, expanding and improving teacher education – in the UK, Europe, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, China, Bangladesh and India. Such pedagogies and models of change also underpin our accelerated and scale-able healthcare education and training programme for frontline healthcare workers across sub-Saharan Africa. Research activity is also generating important insights into the opportunities for fulfilling and personally meaningful learning beyond formal education – for instance, online, in clubs, in homes and in museum spaces. By deploying multi-sensory technologies, the large European participatory, inclusive research project [ARCHES](#) is, for example, enabling people with differences and difficulties associated with perception, memory, cognition and communication to explore cultural heritage sites, sites that had previously been inaccessible to them.

5. Educational technology

Research in the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) includes a focus on innovative technologies in teaching and learning, learning analytics, Open Educational Resources (OERs), citizen science, participatory learning, professional development, accessibility of learning systems, learning design, technology-enhanced assessment, game-based learning, and understanding the changing experience of distance learning. Our expertise in these fields is world-renowned and our researchers carry out exciting projects. Funding reflects a diversity of sources such as the Leverhulme Trust, US-based Hewlett Foundation, the Nominet Trust, European Union research programmes,

and the UK Research Councils. In 2013 IET was granted the first ever [Regius Professorship](#) in Open Education to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

Research in Educational Technology is organised into four programme areas:

- *Learning analytics and learning design*

Learning analytics is a field emerging at the intersection of education research and analytic research. It involves the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of 'big data' related to learners and their contexts, in order to provide actionable intelligence that supports teaching and learning. We have unique research experience in this area and have taken an early lead in the field by developing and deploying analytics and publishing and presenting in this area.

Learning design is described as a methodology for enabling teachers/designers to make more informed decisions in how they go about designing learning activities and interventions, which is pedagogically informed and makes effective use of appropriate resources and technologies. In other words, learning design is focused on 'what students do' as part of their learning, rather than on 'what teachers do' or on what will be taught. Within the OU, there is an increased recognition that learning design is an essential driver for learning.

- *Learning in an Open World*

Global challenges affect the lives and well-being of people worldwide. The Professional and Digital Learning research programme in IET is addressing critical global challenges. We are working with partners in multinational companies, professional bodies, academic institutions, and civil society organisations to coordinate responses to improve the ways people and organisations learn.

In an era of political, social and economic uncertainty, the ways people and organisations work and learn are changing fast. These changes, along with developments in technologies, have stimulated the evolution of systemic new work practices and institutional structures and processes, while automating others. Learning for work is critical for innovation and sits at the top of political agendas in most nations. Yet, most countries and organisations are struggling to improve learning as work transforms.

- *Learning futures*

The work of the Learning Futures theme tackles global challenges in contemporary education and shapes its possible futures. Impact is facilitated by research being carried out in multidisciplinary networks involving academic colleagues, civil society, commercial, technical and arts organisations, policy makers and other partners in the UK and internationally. A major theme is responding to the needs of large numbers of dispersed and disadvantaged learners, based on our research in mobile and ubiquitous learning, citizen engagement, informal language learning and the design of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This body of work includes 'citizen inquiry' for mass-participations in science, smart city approaches for migrants and refugees and professional and digital learning.

- *Professional and digital learning*

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The ground-breaking nature of our research in Professional and Digital Learning is evidenced through impact in organisations around the world in the Energy, Finance, Health, Police, International Development and Education sectors. For example, our insights into knowledge mobilisation has enabled NGOs and research organisations to work more closely. Approaches to knowledge sharing, including Evidence Cafes, have been used by police forces across the UK to reflect upon and change their practice. Tools we have developed to measure and improve learning from incidents are being distributed globally by the Energy Institute. Insights into self-regulated learning in uncertain situations have been adopted by the Chartered Institute of Securities and Investments.

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies

PhD research proposal guidance

Developing your outline research proposal

As part of your application you need to submit a research proposal indicating the area you would like to research. Don't worry if your ideas are not fully defined at this stage. If you are accepted onto the programme, your supervisors will provide help and support in refining your initial area of interest. It is almost certain that your original outline will be significantly amended in the early stages of your PhD. Your research proposal, however, is an important part of your application. It enables selectors to assess your knowledge of the proposed field of study and your ability to frame a project conceptually and propose an appropriate methodology.

Content of research proposal

Your proposal should be no more than 2,000 words long and should include the following. Approximate word lengths for each element of the proposal are indicated in square brackets to guide you on the relative balance of these in the overall proposal.

1. Your name and the title of your thesis

2. The importance/context of your project [100 words]

Explain clearly why the project is worth pursuing. Is your interest a personal one? Have recent advances in the area made a previously unresolved problem solvable? Would resolving the problem you have identified help to answer some larger question? Does the issue that you would like to investigate have some urgent practical importance? Whatever the answer may be, it would be good to include some motivation for your project. Be concise.

3. A review of the literature [1000 words]

Provide a summary of some of the key relevant literature in the area. You do not need to give a long reference list. Instead summarize and critically appraise the key articles or books you regard as particularly relevant to your project. Explain how they relate to your proposal. Do they contain an argument or position you intend to critique or defend, or an idea that could help you to answer your question? This section of the proposal will give some indication of your ability to write critically and concisely and how you are able to balance different arguments in the literature.

4. The research question [50 words]

Your review of the literature and the context of your project should set up the rationale for why you want to research your topic and perhaps the gap in evidence. You should state clearly and precisely the question, or set of questions, that you intend to address. Research proposals – including successful ones – are almost always over-ambitious, but the more broad-ranging a proposal is, the harder it is to see how a coherent thesis might develop from it. So, do not be overambitious – be realistic with what you are going to be able to achieve within a 3 (or 6) year timeframe.

5. Methods [850]

The methods should set out your ideas for how you intend to go about answering your research question.

Methodology

We suggest that you start off by outlining your methodological approach. Link this if you can to the literature you have reviewed, and the data collection and analysis methods you plan to use. For instance, you may plan to take an ethnographic approach, or carry out an intervention study, or to capture objective data and subject them to statistical analysis. This section should explain why and how the approach you plan to use will fit your topic and the problem you are addressing.

Data collection/analysis

You should also outline in this section how you intend to go about collecting your data (for example by observation, interviews, a survey). You also need to describe the process you will use to analyse the data and whether it will involve using specialist software.

Access to participants/recruitment

Make sure you make some reference to how you intend to recruit your participants, whether there are likely to be any challenges and suggestions you have for overcoming these.

Ethics

Also include in this section reference to the ethical aspects to your study. What ethical issues does your research raise? Are human participants involved? How will you secure their consent and safeguard their confidentiality? Does the project involve risk? How will you mitigate this?

Timeline

At the end of this section please provide a proposed timeline for your study, illustrating the key activities. This could be presented diagrammatically.

6. References

List the publication details of all the works you have referenced in your proposal. Use a standard referencing format (e.g. Harvard or APA). This should help us to understand the literature with which you are familiar. Be accurate and precise in how you lay out the references. Your attention to detail will be something we will be considering as we review your proposal. The reference list is not included in the word count.

Additional information

As indicated above, your project will develop under the guidance of your supervisors. You are not committed to everything that you say in your proposal; only to producing the thesis that develops out of it. Please do not worry if you do not know exactly how your thesis will develop: you can signal areas you are uncertain about.

If you are awarded funding for your PhD from an external body, you may be requested to adapt your proposal in line with its requirements. Your supervisors will provide support and guidance in this event.