

**Isla's advice on graduate studies**

Graduate studies applications are a competition for both the students and the potential supervisors, both are looking out for the best. If you are well qualified remember that you will be in high demand, so take your time to find the graduate programme that will be the best for you. When considering a PhD the basic things to ponder are:

1) *The potential supervisor* – Are they nice and can I work with them (this is very important and can make or break your experience), are they going to make me into a better scientist, will they mentor me and will I learn a lot from them? There can be a trade off between working with an early career person who will have more time and will be more motivated to see their students succeed, but may have less in the way of experience, funding and fame or a famous person who can introduce you to all the greats in the field, but may not have as much one-on-one time for their students. Ask the other students in the research group how much time they get with their advisor – weekly one-on-one meetings, are there regular research group meetings, or do they never see their supervisor and are left to their own devices?

2) *The lab/research group* – Are there other students? Are they nice? Will it be a fun place to hang out for a while? Are people into their science/projects? Will there be other students to mentor or go through the same experiences as you (a cohort). Do the students socialize together (e.g., eat lunch together, have lab potlucks/parties, etc. – this can be a good indicator of general lab happiness)?

3) *The university setting* – Is this a place that has other profs and students that I can interact with? Is there an interesting seminar series to go to? Are there discussion groups and a social atmosphere? Are there good resource people who can help me with stats, experimental design, computing?

4) *Money/funding* – Is my stipend sufficient, can I augment it over time with other awards etc.? Do I have to teach (could be good experience, but can distract you from your research)? Is their adequate funding for my research? Will I be allowed to manage some of this money myself when I run the project? Can I hire field assistance? Will I have the help and resources that I need?

5) *The project* – Am I stoked about this research project? Can I make it what I want it to be, or am I doing what ever my supervisors want? Can I have intellectual input into the greater project? Is this the sort of stuff I want to study for the next 3 years (in the UK/Australia)/4+ years (in Canada/US) and potentially for my entire career?

6) *The place* – Do I want to spend my mid/late twenties in this town/country, will I have a good and happy life here, will it be exciting and yet feel like home for me for awhile.

You are probably not going to find a PhD project that ticks all of these boxes, but if you read through the list and feel that a potential graduate programme is really deficient in one of these areas, then take that into account. Three-four years is a fairly long time, so I think it is worth waiting a year or more to find the right project for yourself.

Having doubts is normal, but if an opportunity has got you really excited then it could be the one for you! You can sometimes ask for more time before making a decision, if you need it. If the supervisor is desperate to get a student right away this might not be possible, but sometimes it is good to think on things. A bit of time can make a decision more clear in your mind. Often people will want you to say yes asap, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to.

Finding the perfect project can sometimes mean seeking out opportunities that are not officially advertised, approaching the folks you want to work with suggesting research ideas and trying to capture their interest in you. Applying for independent funding is the best way to have autonomy over your graduate studies.

Good luck finding the right project for you! It is out there!!!