

## A Primer on the LBS OB PhD

### Preface

This article is a (hopefully useful) cross between a blog post and a wiki entry. To begin with, I share some of my personal experiences with the decision to pursue a PhD in Organisational Behaviour (OB) at the London Business School (LBS), the application journey, and life in the PhD program. But along the way, I also provide relevant specifics about the logistics of applying, and milestones of the program once students have joined.

This post is inspired by my colleague [Nina](#)'s piece on the [Strategy & Entrepreneurship PhD at LBS](#) and is meant to be similarly useful to prospective students interested in the [Organisational Behaviour program](#). Although this post represents only one person's perspective, I know from personal experience that there is not a lot of information out there for prospective PhD students, so every additional data point counts!

### Why pursue an OB PhD?

The PhD program (at LBS specifically, and most top schools generally) is a path that involves conducting rigorous research, fulfilling challenging course requirements, and being self-driven, enterprising and persevering. What does it provide in return? The ability to do work that you are passionate about, pursue your intellectual curiosity by asking and answering questions that interest you, operate autonomously while having a strong support system at hand, and over the long run, have an impact on organizations and the people in them that make up the bulk of our societies.

My own journey was what we would call “non-traditional,” since I worked in industry for a few years after my undergraduate studies, before deciding to switch to a research career. I knew that I was always curious about the social world in an academic sense, but it required some soul-searching to decide whether I wanted to commit to a career in research, with the key point of determination being – just because you like consuming research, it does not mean that you will like producing it (see my Adam Grant video suggestion below). Ultimately, I decided that I was indeed interested in trying to pose and answer my own questions about organizations and the people in them. On top of this, I was drawn to the multiple facets of a business school professor's life – from teaching, to inter-disciplinary research collaborations, to studying real-world organizations and trying to make an impact on them over the longer run.

While soul-searching was an important part of my decision process, two other sets of resources helped me greatly. One was to reach out to close friends, colleagues, family, as well as past teachers and professors, to get their inputs on my decision. Sometimes [other people can know parts of us better than we know ourselves](#), and it helps to talk through your thoughts with someone else. A second set of resources was advice posted by others online. I found [Abhishek Nagaraj](#)'s write-up on [applying for a business PhD](#) very helpful to understand the overall trajectory of a career in management academia. Gorges & Turban's [guide to business school PhD applications](#) also drew out a picture of the various things that a business school professor

does on a day-to-day basis. Finally, for a generally useful (and healthily skeptical) view on the decision to pursue a business PhD, I found [Adam Grant](#)'s video on [the subject](#) quite insightful. (One of my favorite tips from his video is the journal reading test – Can you read through a couple of academic journal articles in your area of interest without losing all the interest you started with? Then a PhD might be right for you!)

## Why LBS?

Having decided to pursue a PhD in OB, the next step was to decide on target schools to apply to. LBS was one of my top choices (no seriously, not just saying this for the marketing), and here's why:

- **A top research school:** A cursory look at the publication record of faculty across departments makes it clear that LBS is a top research school. Moreover, the faculty in the OB department were doing research that I personally found interesting and relevant (for example, I remember being fascinated by [Herminia Ibarra](#)'s work on identity and career transitions, and [Dan Cable](#)'s field experiments on getting employees more motivated at work).
- **Depth and breadth of OB faculty research:** At the application stage, I was quite unsure about my exact area of interest for future dissertation work (which is not an uncommon position to be in). So I was particularly drawn to the fact that the OB department at LBS boasts a diverse range of researchers, covering everything from micro to macro topics, and from experimental to archival research methods.
- **Great culture:** LBS has a truly collegial culture. Faculty treat you as colleagues and everyone from the junior-most to the senior-most professors are accessible and amiable. The culture became evident at the interview stage (see application process details below), when I got to meet one-on-one with several of the OB professors. They were all a wonderful combination of smart yet down-to-earth people. [Niro Sivanathan](#), who was in charge of the OB PhD program at the time, was very helpful before, during, and after the interview stages, answering our questions and pairing us up with “buddies” from the PhD student cohort to help us get an insider's view on life at LBS.
- **London calling:** This is an often-overlooked factor, but location really matters, especially when your decision affects half a decade of your life. London was my absolute top preference for both professional and personal reasons. From a research perspective, I knew I wanted to do field work, and London is such a huge hub of business and organizational life that it was a no-brainer. I have already had the opportunity (due to the London location as well as the OB faculty's connections), to conduct research with organizations ranging from a global consumer products company to a small AI startup. From a personal perspective, I enjoy the city of London, its aesthetic, the lifestyle, theatre and sports, diverse food options and the local pub culture.

## What does the application process look like?

The application deadline is typically early December (refer to [this page](#) for the most up-to-date information), and can be broken down into two stages:

1. **Sending in your application:** The application packet includes your past transcripts, your GMAT/GRE scores (the OB department has no preference for one vs. the other), English language test scores (if required), two academic references, and your Statement of Purpose (SoP). Assuming the first three items are taken care of beforehand, your main focus in the Fall months will be on writing the SoP and procuring the academic references. I reached out to my professors well in advance (around September), to give them enough time to write my letters. I also started working on the SoP around August, at least in terms of doing some reading and developing my thinking on research interests.

Of all the application materials, the SoP is one most in your control at the end of the day, and it should be carefully crafted. While it does not need to be a comprehensive research statement, it does need to show your broad motivation for an academic career, your specific area of research interest (doesn't need to be as narrow as a research question, but shouldn't be as broad as a whole domain such as "leadership" either), and why you think LBS in particular would be a good fit. I would suggest getting several people to read through your SoP and give you feedback on multiple drafts. I would also suggest sharing the SoP with your reference writers to give them more context on where you're applying, what your motivation is, etc.

2. **Interviews:** You have done the hard work of essay-crafting and application-preparation. Your profile has impressed the admissions committee. You have been shortlisted to interview at LBS. First off, congratulations! LBS invites very few applicants into the interview stage, and this is a clear signal of your strength as a candidate, regardless of the final outcome afterwards. This part of the process becomes more of a two-way conversation – the faculty want to see if you'd be a good fit with the department, but you also want to see if the department would be a good fit for you.

Typically, you will be invited to fly in (or Skype, if flying is not possible) to London for a 1-2 day program of events. There will be a day of interviews (I had five one-on-one interviews with professors, and one interview with the PhD Program Office), followed by socializing with the broader department. The next day will typically involve a socializing activity (brunch, walking through London street markets, etc.) between just the PhD applicants and current students. All of this is an incredible opportunity to get to know the people you might be spending a lot of your time with going forward, and getting a sense for the culture of the program. I mentioned how LBS was among my top choices before. After the interview stage, it became *the* top choice. And the difference was getting to know the people in the OB department, getting a feel for the culture at LBS, and getting a sense of what it would be like to live in the city of London.

## What does the PhD program look like?

You've gone through all the steps outlined above, received an offer, and made it to London. Now this is where your PhD journey actually begins! The PhD program at LBS is broadly structured into 3 stages:

1. **The “M. Res.” stage:** The first two years are spent working on course requirements for the Master's in Research degree, while also treading into the waters of conducting original research on the side. The M. Res. requires a total of 12 course credits over 2 years. In addition, the program requires a 2<sup>nd</sup> year research paper, which is something that ideally (but not necessarily) goes on to become a part of your dissertation. Here's what a typical course curriculum looks like:

### Year 1

#### **Autumn (October-December, 10 weeks)**

- Basic Readings in Business (taught by [Donal Crilly](#))
- Statistical Research Methods I ([Nicos Savva](#))
- Microeconomics I ([Emre Ozdenoren](#))

#### **Spring (January-March, 10 weeks)**

- Micro OB – Individuals ([Selin Kesebir](#) & [Pier Vittorio Mannucci](#))
- Statistical Research Methods II ([Kamalini Ramdas](#), [Jonathan Berman](#), [Simona Botti](#) & [David Faro](#))
- An elective (can be taken at LBS, LSE, UCL based on what topics you are interested in)

#### **Summer (April-June, 10 weeks)**

- Micro OB – Teams ([Randall Peterson](#) & [Sarah Harvey](#))
- OB Seminar (a topics focused seminar taught by rotating faculty – past seminars have included [Thomas Mussweiler](#) on social comparison, and [Eliot Sherman](#) on gender and labor markets)
- Research Design ([Niro Sivanathan](#) & [Olenka Kacperczyk](#))

### Year 2

#### **Autumn (October-December, 10 weeks)**

- Seminar in Organizational Theory (taught by [Martin Kilduff](#) at UCL)
- 1-2 Electives

#### **Spring (January-March, 10 weeks)**

- 1–2 Electives

### Summer (April-June, 10 weeks)

- OB Seminar (rotating topics)
  - Foundations of Business Research ([Selin Kesebir](#) & [Jean-Pierre Benoit](#))
2. **The “transfer” stage:** After the M. Res. stage, students work on developing research projects towards their dissertation, and on crafting a dissertation outline or proposal. The transfer stage culminates in successfully defending your dissertation proposal.
  3. **The dissertation stage:** Finally, the dissertation stage involves finishing up work on your dissertation and defending your thesis, while also preparing for the academic job market (a topic that would require a whole other blog post).

### Parting Thoughts

Is an OB PhD at LBS right for you? Only you can decide. Am I glad I made the decision to come here? Unequivocally, yes. But one of the most important pieces of advice I’ve picked up from the early years of the PhD experience is that everyone’s journey is different. This is not like a taught Master’s or other typical graduate program. Your PhD experience is defined by you and although different schools will have different program structures, research personalities, and material resources, it will always be up to you to make use of what a given program has to offer and [craft](#) a PhD experience that works best for you.

I hope this post helps you as you decide to embark on the PhD journey, and hope to have you as a colleague sometime soon!