Important items for you to consider

1. Question your motivation

Why do you want to do a research degree?

✓ Good reasons

You need a base for the beginning of your career in research
You have a genuine passion for research of a particular area
You have a naturally inquiring mind to know more
You are interested in a career in research
You want to learn more about research
You want to learn more techniques in research
You want to learn how to develop hypotheses
You want to learn how to design experiments to test hypotheses
You want to learn how to analyse scientific data
You want to learn how to publish scientific data
You want to learn how to write scientifically
You want to improve your tenacity, logical thought, rationality
You want to improve your concentration span
You want to develop independent thinking, decision making skills, good judgement
You want to learn how to write a thesis
You need a postgraduate qualification for career development
You want to learn a little more depth about a particular topic
You want to learn some independence & responsibility for a project

✗ Bad reasons

You didn’t get your dream job
You don’t know what else to do
You don’t like your current job/position
You want a salary increase
You don’t want to enter the workforce
You want to avoid your student loan repayments
You want flexible hours
A friend is doing one
Any fanciful ideas based on fictional notions
A reason to stay living at home
Your parents want you to do it

2. Choosing an area within research or a specific topic

Choose carefully: the time, effort invested and knowledge gained during a PhD project may niche you into a specialised area. Of course, some very successful scientists or clinical researchers end up working in areas quite different to that of their PhD, but this is not always the case.

After your PhD it often seems a waste to move out of the area you studied, unless there is overlap. Make sure you have a genuine interest and passion for a long-term commitment in that area of research. Otherwise, you may find yourself considering other careers after you finish. However, there
are a number of generic skills learnt during a PhD that are useful for future jobs, even if different to your area of expertise.

**Things to consider when choosing a research area or topic**

- Read recent papers from a group you are investigating – is there a topic which grabs your interest?
- Will you be the only one working on a type of project? Are there other people in the field who you can bounce ideas off or seek help from? Is it a well defined field or is it brand new?
- What sort of techniques will you learn? Will you be optimising all the time or using well defined techniques?
- It is a good idea to ensure that part of the project is “guaranteed” and likely to yield results while the other part allows for serendipity or invention.

3. **Your Project**

Developing a sound research plan is necessary both to be accepted into research candidature and to attract funding. Talk with your potential supervisor(s) about your project.

Make sure that you understand what is involved, and that it is definitely do-able.

Ask about the quantity and quality of samples available (if relevant).

Determine whether or not your project design will be sufficiently powered for statistical analysis.

Study the validity and quality of the preliminary data that your project is being based on.

Be critical and go with your "eyes open".

4. **Your Supervisor**

Who will be your supervisor? Choosing a good supervisor is crucial in helping you develop a sound research plan and seeing it through to completion. It is your responsibility to choose and approach a supervisor.

Supervisors should have either a staff or conjoint appointment with the University and be experienced in research and research supervision. You need one research supervisor and at least one auxiliary supervisor. The auxiliary supervisor should provide additional and complementary skills to that of your supervisor and is usually chosen in consultation with your supervisor and perhaps the Postgraduate Co-ordinator. For some students, the auxiliary supervisor may provide a very high degree of supervisory support.

Seek a supervisor who:
- is a master at collaborations - this will aid you in finding resources.
- is a good listener and engages in full and complete discussion regardless of the time it might take.
- has a good publication record (track record) in the research area you want to study, and who is good to work with.
- will be available and preferably close to you at work.

Ask them about their goals. How many students have they supervised / are supervising, and do their students complete their theses in a timely fashion? Look up their publications, and check on their success with grant applications. Talk with the other students and their research assistants for background information.

Also query how much time the supervisor expects to spend with you as a student - will this be enough or too much support? Is the auxiliary supervisor available if your research supervisor is away?

**The Lab or Research Group**

Find out about a research group’s output, what grants they have received and where their work has been published. A research group that received its last grant eight years ago may not be able to give you the support you need.

Talk to other people both inside and outside the research group you are considering.
Check out the working environment within the lab or research group offices. Will you get on with these people? What are their working habits like? Do they share knowledge or keep information separate?

5. **Time commitments**
   During this time you will be expected to undertake research-related training in literature analysis, scientific writing, public speaking, use of research databases etc, as well as performing your research. Make sure that you are prepared for the time commitments. Include time for research training and for writing up your thesis in your research plan.

   There are a number of obligatory requirements including attending the Discipline’s Induction session, Probation Reviews, Annual Progress Reviews, and attending and presenting at the Discipline’s annual Postgraduate Student Conference.

6. **Funding**
   You will need funding while you do the research degree. How will you live? Look up various scholarship awards. Will these be adequate for your needs? What will be the costs of your research? How will you fund these? Don’t forget to speak with your supervisor about potential funding sources.