

Postgraduate Study

If you are considering a course of postgraduate study, it is important to spend some time weighing up the pros and cons and clarifying your motives. Many students find postgraduate study personally rewarding and an additional qualification may give you an advantage in securing employment afterwards, but this is not always the case. Some employers will give you credit for having a higher degree but others will not, and having an inappropriate further degree could even, in some cases, worsen your chances.

Postgraduate study can be:

- a taught course leading to a master's degree
- a research course leading to a master's degree
- a research degree leading to an MPhil or PhD
- a vocational course giving skills or knowledge in a particular area of work.

A VIABLE OPTION?

Use the following comments to help you think about whether postgraduate study is the right step for you.

Some reasons 'for'

'There are no jobs just for first degree graduates.'

Many employers are happy to consider graduates with a bachelor's degree, and while it is true that some of them will be impressed if you have a higher degree, others will not. If this is your motivation, make sure that you research your intended job market thoroughly before committing to further education.

'It will help me improve my career prospects.'

There are fewer higher degree graduates unemployed than first degree graduates¹; however, postgraduate study does not guarantee a job afterwards. Speak to employers and those already in the field to make sure that another qualification will, in fact, improve your employment prospects. You may find that a bachelor's degree is perfectly adequate to enter the job market.

'I want to continue my subject.'

Continuing a subject for its own sake can be a good reason for doing postgraduate study; however, give thought to what you want to do afterwards. Will it fit into your long-term career plan?

'I want to improve my academic record.'

A postgraduate degree can occasionally help compensate for a poor class of first degree, or poor A-levels, but it certainly does not always do so, and employers may still be concerned about your earlier modest performance. If this is the case, relevant work experience may be more convincing to prospective employers than another qualification.

'I am not ready for the job market yet.'

Postgraduate study can 'buy' you time, but it can be an expensive way of delaying employment, so make sure you use the time to make yourself a better candidate later on. This may mean developing employability skills such as working with other people and commercial awareness, as well as academic skills.

Some reasons 'against'

'I might not find work afterwards.'

While a postgraduate qualification does not guarantee work, it could increase your chances. Ask the institution for information on how successful last year's postgraduates were in the job market. You can then decide whether it is worth the risk - and the cost.

'I will become overqualified.'

This can be a danger if you look for work not related to your postgraduate study. It is less likely to be a problem if the work is closely connected to your studies.

'I can not afford it.'

Finance can be a big problem, but many people find ways to get the money together. See 'Financing your postgraduate study' later in this article for more information.

'I have had enough of being a student.'

Postgraduate study does not suit everyone. However, some people feel differently after a break and go on to do postgraduate study after they have been working for a while.

ANY QUESTIONS?

Postgraduate courses are a product for sale and it is worth shopping around. Do not be afraid to ask questions: you are the customer. If at all possible, visit the institutions and talk to staff, students and recent graduates. Here are some questions you could ask - plus a few for you to think about yourself.

For all postgraduate study

- What are the entry requirements and will I meet them?
- When do I need to apply?
- How much are the fees and likely living costs?
- Is funding available, how do I apply, and what are my chances?
- If I do not get funding how will I pay for it?
- What do I plan to do afterwards?
- Where have previous students found employment?

For research degrees

- In what area do I want to do research?
- Is my prospective supervisor academically suitable, approachable and likely to be available throughout my research degree?
- What percentage of past students finished their research successfully?
- How good are the research facilities?

For academic taught courses

- Who are the tutors and how often will I see them?
- What are the compulsory elements in the course, the optional elements and the teaching methods?
- Is there a project or dissertation and what does it involve?

For vocational courses

- How many previous students found employment related to the course?
- What help do the tutors give in finding suitable work afterwards?

Autumn term

Investigate taught courses and research degrees. Talk to your tutors, surf the internet, investigate potential courses in your careers service, send off for prospectuses and application forms, write to postgraduate admission tutors asking for information and advice (including information on funding). With the exception of some vocational courses, there is no central clearing house and you will need to apply individually to each course.

Apply for vocational training courses. Many vocational courses, such as teacher training, start making offers in the autumn term. If you are late in applying you may find the places have been filled. With some courses you apply direct to each course which interests you; with others you make a central application to a clearing house. Find out the correct procedure and timetable for the courses which interest you.

Spring term

Apply for (academic) taught courses and research degrees. Be aware of any deadlines and in particular those for funding applications: some can be as early as 1 May. Although places on postgraduate courses are still on offer in the summer vacation, your choice will be more restricted.

HOW ARE PEOPLE SELECTED?

For academic courses and research degrees, selection is on academic grounds. For a taught master's you should be in line for a second class degree; for a research-based degree an upper second is usually required. People who do not fully meet the criteria do sometimes get in, so there is no harm in applying. For vocational courses, relevant experience and a commitment to the work for which the course trains you can often be more important than academic achievement. You need to show that you have researched your reasons for applying thoughtfully and thoroughly.

FINANCING YOUR POSTGRADUATE STUDY

This is a complicated area. With the exception of teacher training, obtaining funding for postgraduate study can be extremely difficult. The funding body depends on the subject, so find out which one deals with what you want to do, and the correct application procedure and deadlines. There is a list of the main grant-giving bodies for UK nationals below. If the official funding body for your course refuses you, you cannot apply to another one. Some courses attract no funding at all. If you do not get funding, you will have to find the fees as well as your living costs. Fees vary, but are often around £3,000 a year for UK and other EU nationals. Popular courses in subjects such as business and journalism may cost considerably more, and costs may vary between institutions.

MAIN FUNDING BODIES

Ask the academic department to identify the right funding body for the course or research you want to do and follow the appropriate procedure. Closing dates can be as early as 1 May, and if you miss a deadline you will not be considered for that year. The main funding bodies are:

- Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council - www.bbsrc.ac.uk
- Arts and Humanities Research Board (for humanities and vocational subjects) - www.ahrb.ac.uk
- Economic and Social Research Council (for most social science subjects) - www.esrc.ac.uk
- Engineering and Physical Science Research Council - www.epsrc.ac.uk

- Medical Research Council - www.mrc.ac.uk
- Natural Environment Research Council - www.nerc.ac.uk
- Science & Technology Facilities Council - www.scitech.ac.uk

To be eligible for an award, you have to be resident in the UK - not for the purposes of education - for three years before your postgraduate study begins. Different procedures may apply if you are from Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man or the Channel Islands. If you are a national from another country in the European Union you usually cannot apply for a full award, but you may be eligible for a fees award from a research council. International students should contact their own government or the British Council for information on sources of funding. You usually need a very good class of degree, often a first, and even then you might not be successful. Many students get a place but no funding.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING OPTIONS

- Scholarships can be awarded for academic ability and potential.
- Family support can help with fees, loans, accommodation.
- Loans, for example, career development loans.
- Charities and educational trusts may provide small grants.
- Research and teaching assistantships - most common in sciences.
- Sponsorship can be obtained from employers (not common).
- Part-time work can provide a bit of money; however, postgraduate study often does not give you much spare time.
- Take a year out to earn money.
- Do your postgraduate study part-time - the fees will be lower, and you might combine it with part-time work.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- *Postgraduate Study & Research*, AGCAS Booklet, CSU Ltd, 2008
- *Prospects Postgraduate Funding Guide*, Graduate Prospects, 2008
- www.prospects.ac.uk Search for postgraduate courses and read profiles of universities around the UK. Also includes sections for international students continuing their studies in the UK and for UK students looking into postgraduate study abroad
- www.careers.lon.ac.uk/postgrad Information about The Guardian Postgraduate Study & Training Fair from The Careers Group
- www.postgrad.hobsons.com Includes a postgraduate course search, tips on applications and funding, and a section on what to expect as you begin life as a postgrad

1 According to HESA, just 4.8% of master's graduates and 3.9% of PhD graduates were unemployed 6 months after graduation, as opposed to 6.1% of first degree graduates. *The Independent*, 16 November 2006.

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