

## Choosing a Policy Masters

### General Information

Notes by Jeff Riley, King's College, University of London from a discussion with Professor Ken Young, Programme Director of the new [MA/Diploma in Public Policy](#). Kings College, University of London.

Recent years have seen a considerable growth of interest in public affairs. This is partly due to significant events which have occurred in the world: globalisation, devolution, EU expansion, terrorism and international conflict. Another factor has been the growth in opportunities for employment in government, national and local, and by the increasing professionalisation of organisations such as NGOs, think tanks and charities. These developments are mirrored by a growth in the number of courses in the policy area. The prospects web site ([prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk)) lists 369 postgraduate social policy courses in the UK. Students on such courses are often already working in the policy sector while seeking to enhance their professional development, while others are more recent graduates looking to pursue policy careers.

Because relatively few students take policy masters purely from academic interest they can be considered vocational courses though their vocational content can vary considerably. They range from courses that have a very academic and theoretical approach to courses that provide accredited work experience. Amongst the issues students will need to consider when selecting Masters courses are the following

- **Course content**  
You can assume that any policy masters will have a conceptual or theoretical component to provide the basic intellectual tools for understanding public policy, although the weight given to that component varies widely. Another feature will be the availability of substantive courses dealing with policy in a range of areas. Some masters programmes provide training in research methods, both qualitative and statistical. This training can be especially valuable if you plan to continue your studies to PhD level, in which case you should check that any programme you apply for is 'recognised' by the Economic and Social Research Council. Training in statistical analysis is much more common in the US, where a policy masters is seen as a route to a policy analysis career, but job requirements in the UK tend to be broader-based.
- **Customisation** – if you are clear about which area of policy you want to work in – for example health, population, refugees or education – you may find social policy courses that provide those specific emphases. However, even if the course has a more general, broader approach then you should still be able to select modules that shape the masters in a specific way to reflect your developing interests. If you considering a more general course then do look at the modules available to ensure they provide a wide enough range to meet your likely interests. 'General' courses will also provide opportunities for specialisation through the research dissertation that forms a key part of such courses.
- **Cost** – courses are priced differently and unless you have an employer paying you can expect to have to pay for yourself. If money is a problem then you may consider studying part time. In addition, of course, it is cheaper to live in certain parts of the UK than others.
- **Location** – location is important not only because of living costs but because it affects the range of external contributors to courses. Students choosing courses may want to find out about the range of visiting lecturers and speakers and by finding out whether courses have arrangements for organisations in their area to take students on work experience. London has a great advantage here of course but there are other colleges that can network with regional organisations. For example The University of Birmingham acts in this way for the West Midlands region and similarly Strathclyde in Glasgow for Scotland

- **Work experience** – Getting practical experience in the sector is essential to help the move into employment. Increasingly courses recognise this by providing accredited work experience and many have built relationships with specific organisations. Applicants should explore what arrangements, if any, have been made for students to obtain work experience. Don't be too shocked if you get the impression that you will be left to your own devices to arrange work experience as many highly reputable courses may not as yet provide accreditation. Even where accreditation isn't in place courses may still provide a channel to relevant organisations. This could mean anything from simply putting up relevant adverts on departmental noticeboards to having organisations reserving internships for specific courses.
- **Entry criteria** – academic institutions teach to a certain level. It is reasonable to assume that, in general, the market leaders – colleges such as King's College, LSE and UCL will require more from applicants in terms of their academic achievements and teach to that higher level. You need to make sure that you can work to the course standards. One further point needs to be made here. While colleges with a good track record can help your CV stand out it doesn't mean to say that if you take a policy masters elsewhere then it won't be possible to get started in the sector. The academic qualification and where you obtained is only part of the equation and you need to combine it with relevant work experience and the right amount of other skills to be an effective operator.
- **Reputation** – there isn't a league table of 'the best' courses. National surveys are conducted by The Quality Assurance Agency ([qaa.ac.uk](http://qaa.ac.uk)) and by The Guardian and The Times newspapers but these don't focus closely enough on specific courses. Remember that an institution's reputation for good or ill may not carry down to the level of specific courses. A college with a middling reputation in general may well have a great reputation for niche courses. People who work in the sector would be a good place to start to try and establish which colleges and courses have a good reputation