

Postgraduate study

Further study is a huge commitment in terms of time and money, so it's important to understand it properly to make sure it's the right option for you.

Postgraduate study has the ability to open new career paths to you both inside and outside of academia, but be aware that additional qualifications alone won't guarantee you a job. You still need to make it clear what your motivations were for further study and why it's made you a stronger candidate.

If your main motivation for further study is to improve your chances of succeeding in your chosen sector, make sure you know what qualification (if any) is most sought after by employers. The answer might be none – some value practical experience more than qualifications. If you're considering postgraduate study because you want an academic career, make sure you've done some research into how realistic a goal this is in your chosen field.

What are your options?

Masters

Most commonly an MSc or an MA (Master of Science and Art respectively), these are year-long taught programmes, requiring in-depth study and a significant research project or dissertation. Some masters courses are theoretical, while others have a more vocational focus – MScs for examples can be research-based. Applications tend to be made directly to the institution.

Postgraduate diplomas

More often known as Graduate Diplomas or conversion courses, these are similar to a masters but without the dissertation. These are typically a bridge into a profession; e.g. the graduate diploma in law (GDL) provides a fast-track route for non-law graduates into the profession.

Postgraduate professional qualifications

Some professions have an examination system to ensure those working in it have the required knowledge and ability. Generally these are studied while working, and often your employer will support you in ways such as paying the fees and allowing you study leave. Examples include the ACCA accountancy exam and the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education).

PhD

Also known as a doctorate, this is a research degree required for an academic career which consists of a large research project generally lasting between three and four years. Typically you'll need to complete a master's before undertaking a PhD although this may not always be the case. Search websites such as www.jobs.ac.uk and www.findaphd.com to view available PhDs, or contact departments or potential supervisors with linked areas of interest directly.

Why?

You may want to study at postgraduate level:

- If you need it for your chosen profession and to demonstrate commitment to it.
- To take the first step towards an academic career.
- To meet like-minded people and start building a professional network.
- If your home country standard is four to five years in higher education.

Points to consider:

- Why do you want to study at postgraduate level?
- What are your reasons for studying at a particular institution?
- Why does a particular course interest you? Are there specific aspects?
- Is it taught or research based?
- Do you meet the entry requirements?

Funding

Funding postgraduate study is more complex than at undergraduate level, and it may be that you need to fund your study through a variety of smaller sources. Start by looking at the website of the institutions you're applying to, as they'll tell you whether there are any bursaries or Research Council funding available. For a list of all UK research councils, see www.ukri.org.

The funding available to you will differ according to the subject you're studying. Some government funding is available for courses in healthcare, social work and teaching, while employers may be willing to fund study in engineering and the sciences. Some charities and organisations offer grants and scholarships across a range of disciplines.

Postgraduate loans, similar to those for undergraduate study, are now available for EU nationals applying for a masters, or alternatively many high street banks offer career development loans.

Make sure you're well informed on the different options available by using sites such as

- www.prospects.ac.uk/funding
- www.targetcourses.co.uk
- www.findamasters.com/funding

Also use your careers department and speak to academics within your department, particularly if you're applying to the same institution for postgraduate study.

Some students opt for part-time study if there's no funding available, particularly at masters level. This allows you to spread your payments out, and work part-time to cover your living expenses.

How to apply

Most institutions require you to apply to them directly, although some take applications through a centralised system such as UCAS. Check the website of all universities you're applying to, and if in doubt contact their admissions office.

You'll normally be required to submit a personal statement, highlighting your experiences and motivation for the subject and institution. Follow the instructions given carefully. Take a look at our title *Cover letters and personal statements* for some more guidance on this.

Personal statement tips

- Write a different statement for each application.
- Leave plenty of time – it can be tough to write a good one.
- Keep the tone positive and enthusiastic.
- Don't use overly long sentences.
- If the length hasn't been specified by the course provider, you should aim for one side of A4.
- Ask someone (a careers consultant or an academic) to review it before submitting.

What you should mention:

- Why you are choosing to apply for further study, and that particular course.
- Which topics particularly interest you, and why?
- How would you like to broaden your research?
- Examples of your proven academic ability.
- Details of any extracurricular activity, work experience or other skills providing they reinforce your interest in the subject or show your strength as a candidate.