

**University of Surrey**

Careers Service

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers>

## **Postgraduate study and research**

### Taking your education further

#### **Why undertake postgraduate study?**

There are many reasons why you may wish to do postgraduate study. These include:

- **Enjoyment of your chosen subject.** A highly motivating reason, but make sure you consider whether the postgraduate programme fits in with your long-term career plans.
- **Your chosen career requires a professional qualification.**
- **It may enhance your job prospects, and help you stand out from the crowd.** However you should be aware that although some employers place great value in the more specialised skills and knowledge from a postgraduate course, for other employers it does not offer any advantage. Given that the fees for postgraduate courses are usually higher than for undergraduate courses and funding more sporadic, it is important to check out the potential career outcomes before you sign up. It is always a good idea to investigate the destinations information of course finishers for those courses which interest you. You can do this by contacting the university's careers service or in some cases, looking on their careers service's web-site.
- **Convert to a new career area.** Many postgraduate programmes provide a way of converting to particular career areas, such as non-business graduates who wish to work within the field of business or non-law graduates who want a career in law.

#### **What is available?**

There are two distinct types of study, **Taught Courses** and **Research Degrees**.

#### **What are taught courses?**

##### **Masters programme:**

- Master of Arts (MA), Masters of Science (MSc) and Masters in Business Management (MBA) normally take one year if studied full-time or two years (or more) if studied part-time. They are very similar to undergraduate courses in that the main part of the time is devoted to attending lectures. This may take up the first 8 or 9 months of the course and is followed by written examinations. A period of research lasting for 2 to 3 months usually follows and this is presented in the form of a

dissertation. Some courses are vocational and can lead to exemptions and /or a professional qualification. A Masters in Research (MRes) is different as it is required to guarantee at least 60% of its content is individual research project work, as it prepares you for a PhD and /or a career in research.

- To be eligible for a taught Masters course, you normally need to hold a degree in the same subject as the intended area of study. However, there are some important exceptions to this rule particularly in subjects such as Information Technology and Business Administration. If you don't have the right qualification, it is sometimes possible to undertake a preliminary course such as a Certificate or a Diploma in order to prepare for the more advanced study to follow.

### **Postgraduate diploma/certificate (e.g. Journalism, Teaching etc)**

- Is likely to last nine months full-time.
- May provide the professional qualification needed for a particular career and give you an advantage in the job market.
- May be the initial stages of a Masters award.

### **Do you have the right qualities for a taught course?**

- You will need an inquisitive mind to maintain the kind of motivation needed to keep wanting to learn and discover new information.
- Masters require a high level of intellectual ability in order to cope with the pressures of having to understand what are likely to be complex arguments, facts or theories. Course directors normally look for at least a 2.2 as evidence of this and for many popular courses a 2.1 minimum is required.
- You will need a high degree of organisational ability and time management as postgraduate courses can be very intensive.

## **Research Degrees**

The most well known is the PhD, sometimes known as a DPhil.

- Can be started following on from a first degree or after a Masters. With Arts and Humanities subjects it is usually necessary to do a Masters first.
- Involves carrying out a piece of innovative work in a particular area of study over a period of at least 3 years plus time to write up. It is possible to achieve a Masters in Philosophy (MPhil) as a precursor to a PhD.
- The start of your research invariably involves a very extensive survey of all the previous work undertaken in that area. You would need to report on your research by writing it up in the form of a thesis. Following submission, you then have an oral exam called a viva. Occasionally, the examiners are not completely happy with the work and ask the candidate to rewrite parts of the thesis.
- The NewRoutePhD involves training in professional skills such as teaching and management as well as research and takes up to 4 years to complete see [www.newroutephd.ac.uk](http://www.newroutephd.ac.uk)

- Doctorates with a considerable taught component are available in some vocational areas including engineering (EngD), business (DBA) and psychology (PsychD)

### **Do you have the right qualities for research?**

- You will need an inquisitive mind to maintain the kind of motivation needed to keep wanting to learn and discover new information.
- A high level of intellectual ability will be needed in order to cope with the pressures of having to understand what are likely to be complex arguments, facts or theories.
- You will need a high degree of organisational ability and time management as so many different things need to be attended to.
- It is not at all uncommon for research to work out quite differently from what was hoped or planned. Expected results may not materialise, experiments may not work and so on. At times such as these it is essential to stay calm and to keep on trying. In other words you need to be both patient and persistent.
- Because research requires something new to be found or achieved it is also important to enjoy solving problems and to have confidence in your own creative ability.

## **Funding**

The two main expenses you will incur are tuition fees and living expenses. Although grants do exist for some postgraduate courses, they are not automatic and many Masters courses do not attract any funding. It is often much easier to secure the offer of a place on a postgraduate course than to acquire the money to finance it. Generally there is more funding available for science and technology courses and PhDs in any subject, than for Masters in arts and social sciences. Many students will need to fund their study through personal loans such as Career Development Loans and other means.

### **How will you be funded for a taught course?**

The most important sources of funding for postgraduate students in the UK are the Government Research Councils (RCUK). To be eligible for a full Research Council award covering fees and living expenses you will normally be an EU national who has been ordinarily resident in the UK for three years preceding your application (not three years as a student). Students outside the UK but in the EU are eligible for awards for tuition fees. **International students** are not eligible for Research Council awards. Your first point of contact should be your education ministry in your home country. The British Council [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org) will also be able to offer advice, as will the university to which you are applying.

The seven research councils are:

- Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

- Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) [www.bbsrc.ac.uk](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk)
- Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) [www.epsrc.ac.uk](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)
- Medical Research Council (MRC) [www.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.mrc.ac.uk)
- Natural Environment Council (NERC) [www.nerc.ac.uk](http://www.nerc.ac.uk)
- Science and Technology Research Council (STFC) [www.scitech.ac.uk](http://www.scitech.ac.uk)

**Applying for funding:** The following statements usually apply when considering financial support.

- **Firstly, you cannot apply directly to the Research Councils.** However, you should apply directly to the department in which you want to study. Once you have been offered a place your course director will discuss possible sources of finance with you, which may include the offer of a grant.
- Secondly, it is important to get a good honours degree, at least a 2.2, if you wish to do a Masters. In practice, course directors can ask for a 2.1 or First, if they know that candidates of that calibre have been attracted to the course in previous years.
- Thirdly, it is essential to get at least a 2.1, to maximise your chances to do research. In practice supervisors can ask for a First if they know that they will attract candidates of that calibre. Although unusual it is not impossible, to gain a research degree with a 2.2 or third.
- Finally, The ESRC will not fund any stand alone Masters courses unless the student applies to do a 1+3 programme, which means that you would need to commit to doing a Masters followed by a PhD as a package.

Should you fail to secure an award, there are other ways to finance a postgraduate course.

- First ask your potential course director/supervisor how previous students have financed their study. There may, for example, be institutional scholarships available. You might also be able to supplement your study through part-time tutoring and demonstrating to undergraduate classes.
- Trusts and charities - The Educational Grants Directory, available in the Careers Service, may be worth a look.
- Some universities offer institution scholarships.
- Employer funding – Some courses attract sponsorship from employers. There are also some collaborative awards such as CASE Studentships, which are part Research Council and part employer funded and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) where a research project is carried out between a university and an employer see [www.ktponline.org.uk/graduate](http://www.ktponline.org.uk/graduate).
- Many students decide to take out a Professional and Career

Development Loan. Details are available at [www.direct.gov.uk/pcdl](http://www.direct.gov.uk/pcdl) . However make sure you check out the repayment requirements as they can be very demanding especially on top of a student loan.

- If you do have to find your own finance, fees for UK and EU students for a full-time taught Masters are in the region of £5,000-£8,000 though this will vary from institution to institution. MBA courses are considerably more expensive ranging from £18,000 - £45,000. You will also need to set aside about £10,500 - £12,700 for maintenance depending, of course on where you live and how frugal you are.
- Many students now study for Masters courses part-time so that they can also work to earn some money and spread out the cost of the fees.
- Some vocational courses leading to a professional qualification such as teaching, social work and some health care professions attract grants from government departments or the NHS.

To find out more information about funding pick up a copy of the Prospects Postgraduate Funding Guide from the Careers Service or see [www.prospects.ac.uk/funding](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding).

## When and how to apply

### Where to find suitable courses:

**Taught courses** - The best way to find out what courses are available is to look at the postgraduate section of the **Prospects** web-site [www.prospects.ac.uk/linkspgdbase](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/linkspgdbase) or Targetcourses web-site [www.targetcourses.co.uk](http://www.targetcourses.co.uk) respectively. Also, look at [www.FindAMasters.com](http://www.FindAMasters.com) which lists Masters courses in all disciplines.

**Research** -The Prospects and Targetcourses web-sites as listed above are a good source or [www.findaphd.com](http://www.findaphd.com) for PhD opportunities in sciences, maths, engineering, computing or social sciences. PhD studentships in all areas can be found at [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk). This site also includes details of research assistant jobs. If you are still a student and there is a member of staff working in the area which interests you – make an appointment to speak to them. They may be looking for a PhD student or may be able to suggest possibilities at other universities. Certain specialist publications, such as Nature and New Scientist carry advertisements for PhDs.

### Timetable for applications

The following is a *suggested* timetable only. The intention is that this will allow time for adequate preparation. Prior to starting your postgraduate study:

- 18-12 months - research options and funding. Make personal action plan.
- 12-6 months (Autumn/Winter) - apply for places (and funding, if necessary).

- Last 6 months (Spring) - continue with applications and attend interviews

Some courses have published closing dates, for example teaching, medicine, law. Other courses fill up very early or set their own closing dates, so it is essential that your early research identifies these courses. A lack of a closing date does not mean an application can be left until the last minute. It is a good idea to attend a postgraduate study fair see [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pgfairs](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pgfairs) for a list of dates. You could also attend department open days or arrange a visit to the target department.

### **Application procedures**

Vary between institutions and individual courses. There is no central admissions system that covers all postgraduate courses although there are some clearing houses for some vocational courses, which you can check on [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations). Research the procedure in place for your chosen postgraduate study. It could involve:

- Informal approach by email to ask for more details about the course/research, then complete application form.
- If interested in a PhD send a copy of your CV to the potential supervisor emphasising your academic record and proposed research interests.
- In the case of research positions, you will almost certainly be asked to outline a research proposal. This is easier if you have already been in contact with your potential supervisor to find out more information about the proposed research.
- Make sure you enclose a covering letter with an application form or CV which emphasises your interest.
- You will need good academic references, so choose your referees with care and discuss your plans with them. Make sure you keep them informed of your applications and progress.

Vocational courses with centralised applications include:

- Teaching – Graduate Teacher Training Registry (GTTR) primary teaching has a 1<sup>st</sup> December deadline, but apply earlier if at all possible.
- Law – Central Applications Board, Legal Practice Course (LPC) early December for non-law students the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) is early February.
- Clinical Psychology –the deadline is 1<sup>st</sup> December, but apply earlier if at all possible.
- Graduate Entry into Medicine – Application through UCAS by 15<sup>th</sup> October
- Social Work – Application through UCAS by 15<sup>th</sup> January.

## Writing a personal statement.

Many application forms for postgraduate courses require a personal statement outlining your reasons for wanting to study the course and evidence of your suitability for higher level study. Make sure you follow the instructions carefully as not all universities require the same information. Remember to check the required word count and stick to a logical structure by grouping relevant information together in paragraphs with sub-headings if this helps. You need to ensure that what you write is both persuasive and accurate, with no spelling or grammatical errors.

If you are applying for a **Masters** course you will need to include:

- Why you are interested in this particular area of study or research and what have you done to find out about it?
- Where do you hope it will lead you in terms of your career and how do you hope to benefit from this study?
- Give evidence of relevant research or related skills. What do you have to offer in terms of your knowledge and skills gained from your first degree? Include any relevant modules, dissertation or projects, report writing, familiarity with relevant techniques or equipment.
- Additional skills and qualities which you have acquired from any work experience, voluntary and extra-curricular activities.
- What attracts you to this specific course at this university? Refer to any special features, such as specific modules or teaching styles.

If you are applying for a **vocational Masters** or **postgraduate diploma/certificate** which leads to a **professional** qualification such as teaching, law, psychology etc you will need to include:

- The reasons why you are interested in this career and your motivation for doing the course.
- An outline of your relevant work experience with evidence of the skills you have developed. What have you done to find out about the career? Include any voluntary work, work shadowing and extra-curricular activities. Reflect on this experience and explain how you benefited from it.
- An explanation of the relevance of your previous education including specific modules and projects/dissertations from your first degree.
- Explain how you think this particular course will help you with your career ambitions and note any specific features of the course, which interest you.
- Why you? Summarise the skills and qualities which you can bring to the profession and what is unique about you.

If you are applying for teaching courses, you will find more relevant information on the Prospects web-site [www.prospects.ac.uk/education](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/education)

## Writing a research proposal for a PhD application

In the case of research positions you will almost certainly be asked to write an outline research proposal. In order to do this it is advisable to contact your potential supervisor for more information about the proposed area of research. You will then be able to write your research proposal based around the information that the supervisor has sent you. Make sure that you have all the guidelines and application details you need before you start and are aware of what your chosen department is looking for. Generally a research proposal is a short document probably between 300 and 1000 words and should be no more than two pages.

The research proposal reader will normally be seeking clear answers to three overarching questions:

- **What is the proposed research trying to find out or achieve?** Try to identify the general and specific questions that the research is designed to answer. It is easier to start with the general and move to the specific.
- **How will it do that?** What research methods do you think would fit in with the research questions? What primary material might you use and how will you use it? What will be the overall design or framework?
- **Why is the research worth doing?** What is the potential relevance and significance of the research and who might benefit from it?

A strong introduction is important to a persuasive proposal. It should clearly state the area and topic for research and can point ahead to the research questions but does however need to be succinct. The aim of the document is to prove that you can do the research and that what you want to do can be done. It is also a way of introducing yourself and your research interests to your potential supervisor. It is crucial that your proposal is well written and is both clear and convincing without any errors in spelling, grammar or punctuation.

Suggested structure:

- Title – Give a clear idea of your topic;
- Thesis – The focus and argument of your research as well as the field and primary sources it will cover. You will need to explain how any work you have already done in your first degree or masters makes you particularly well equipped to work on this topic.
- The body of the proposal – this should cover the proposed methodology;
- Conclusions that might be drawn from the research, they will be provisional at this stage;
- Your future career – relate your proposal to your career interests;
- Append a draft bibliography.

Take this draft to an academic for advice and make sure that you meet the deadline for submission. More information is available on <http://port.igrs.sas.ac.uk>

## Interviews

An interview gives you the chance to see the department, meet academic staff and possibly some current students. There are no set questions for postgraduate interviews but you may be asked about:

- Why you have chosen to apply for this particular course in this department or university;
- Your motivation for doing further study, what do you hope to achieve?
- Your proposed research project and your current research skills;
- Evidence of having the relevant academic and personal skills;
- Any relevant work experience, voluntary work or other extra-curricular activities and what you have learnt as a result.
- Examples of your time-management and organisational skills;
- Your career aims and ambitions- if the interview is for a vocational course, you will be expected to have researched the career thoroughly. In some cases like teaching you will need to have acquired relevant work experience and will be asked to reflect on this during the interview.

Make sure you are familiar with the research interests of the academic staff in the department by looking at their web pages. Before you go, prepare some questions of your own to ask, such as about tutorial arrangements and sources of financial support.

If you are applying for **research** positions it is important to choose the best potential **supervisor** you can, however your choice may be quite restricted depending on your topic of interest. You may therefore like to ask them some questions about their preferred style for managing PhD students and how their previous students have progressed.

## What about postgraduate study overseas?

The best place to start your investigation is to look at the Prospects web-site and the study abroad section at [www.prospects.ac.uk/links/countries](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/countries). You will find a really helpful country by country index. In addition to this the careers information room contains files on individual countries. You can also read through the AGCAS information booklet **Postgraduate Study and Research** which is located in the Postgraduate Study section of the Careers Information Room.

**Finally if having read this leaflet you are still unsure whether postgraduate study or research is right for you, then make an appointment to chat it over with your careers adviser who will be pleased to help.**

