

STAGE 1. Thinking about PGT study?

A clear idea of what you want and/or need from postgraduate study, before you start looking, can help focus your search. Whatever your circumstances, here are some questions you might find it useful to consider.

Why do people undertake postgraduate study?

In most cases, the answer to this question relates in some way to employment or their career. A postgraduate qualification can:

- help to enhance job prospects (entry to a career);
- facilitate a change in career;
- provide specialist knowledge (enabling progression, including into doctoral research); or
- help you stand out in the crowded graduate employment market.

Others study simply for personal interest, love of the subject or of learning, for self-development and/or to stay in the higher education environment.

Would it make me more employable?

Having a postgraduate qualification can make some people more employable, but this depends on both the person and the employer for which they want to work. Some employers will place additional value on a postgraduate qualification in addition to a first degree, but not all – the situation varies in different sectors and also from employer to employer. For some specialist roles and employers, it may be a requirement to have a postgraduate qualification.

If your first degree grade was not as good as you hoped, it is not automatic that an additional postgraduate qualification would compensate for this, and it would be wise to consult potential employers to see how they would view it.

To find out more about how a postgraduate qualification could assist your own career, we recommend getting some professional advice. If you have a degree, try talking to your former university's careers service. Some careers services participate in a mutual aid scheme, allowing graduates to make use of the resources of the careers service nearest to where they now live, so you may be able to use a nearby higher education institution. Alternatively, if you are in work, talk to your employer's human resources (HR) department (if they have one). If you are in the UK, you can also call the National Careers Service helpline (0800 100900).

What constitutes taught postgraduate study?

This toolkit focuses on taught postgraduate study ('PGT'), and not postgraduate research ('PGR') such as towards a doctoral qualification like a PhD.

1. What are the main types of taught postgraduate qualification, course or study?

Masters courses, leading to qualifications such as MSc, MA and (particularly in Scotland) MLitt. These include:

- **specialist taught Masters** for particular subjects: these are likely to require an undergraduate degree in the same or a closely related subject area. The most common are LL.M (Master of Laws), M.Mus (Music), and M.F.A (Fine Arts). Some specialist Masters are also expressed as, for example, M.Sc (Econ) which is an M.Sc in Economics;
- some specifically **career-related Masters**: common examples are M.B.A (Master of Business Administration) M.S.W (Master of Social Work), and M.Couns (Master of Counselling);
- **integrated or 'undergraduate' Masters** (such as M.Eng, M.Sci, M.Chem, M.Phys, which are often found in the sciences but also more widely in Scotland) and are four-year 'first' degrees which result in a Masters-level qualification. Note that the Masters part cannot be studied as a course on its own.

Postgraduate diplomas and certificates can be academic or vocational and allow students to study something new or build on the skills and knowledge gained during their first degree. As well as postgraduate certificates (PGCert) and diplomas (PGDip), there are specific qualifications for those wanting to enter teaching or law: graduates can qualify to become teachers through the postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE, and in some cases a PGDE Diploma) while those interested in a career in law could take the postgraduate diploma in law (GDL). Postgraduate certificates are often shorter than diplomas, but each will take a number of months (less than one year) to complete full-time. Those who successfully complete a postgraduate diploma often have the option to continue their studies, usually in the form of a dissertation, to turn their qualification into a Masters.

Professional or vocational qualifications (at postgraduate level) are usually taken to improve skills or gain attributes required by specific jobs. Most involve practical training, and the opportunity to experience a professional role. For example, many graduates become qualified solicitors by taking a Legal Practice Course (LPC). Such professional qualifications can also help you to gain recognition and achieve a higher level of competence in your chosen field.

2. What is a conversion course?

If a course is described in this way, it usually means it is for somebody who wants to change academic direction or career and/or whose undergraduate degree was either in a completely different or different but related area. For example, this could be for non-technical people with no previous experience to learn about computer science, or a management course for those with academic or scientific backgrounds. Always check the entry requirements for these courses to make sure they are intended for students with your academic background. If you are looking for conversion courses and can't see any with this label, you can always ask the department if they offer courses for students in your situation. If they themselves don't, they may know of another department that does.

3. What is a research-based Masters?

Research-based Masters degrees include MRes (Master of Research), MScRes (MSc by Research) and MAREs (MA by Research), and MPhil. An MPhil linked to a PhD programme will not be a standalone qualification – in that case it is the first part of the PhD. Some institutions offer standalone MPhils but they are relatively uncommon (usually lasting two years). The difference lies both in the way the course is taught, and what it is intended for. A taught Masters typically consists mostly of modules or course elements that are taught directly to students and this teaching comprises usually around 70-80% of the course elements. The course may still include a research or other type of project, or a placement, often towards the end, but it will be a relatively small element of the course. A research Masters, however, generally consists of only two or three taught elements at the most, and these usually relate to research methods and skills. The largest part of the course, generally 50% or more, would be one or more research projects in the particular subject area undertaken by the student. While a taught Masters may be specifically career-related, and could help you to progress to a PhD if you wished, a research Masters is specifically designed for those who wish to continue on to a PhD or some other type of research-related career.

4. Do I have to study the same subject as I did for my first degree?

No. Many people study a completely different subject, as may have been obvious from the piece above about conversion courses. The advice in this toolkit will always be to check the requirements of the course you are interested in.

5. Are all different taught postgraduate qualifications considered equal?

The section above about types of qualification indicated that not all postgraduate qualifications are considered equal by everybody, but they all do involve Masters-level study, and they can be for different purposes. Standalone Masters qualifications may be regarded as the highest level within these, and all those would be regarded as at the same standard, but they may start with the same course as for a PG Certificate or Diploma, but involving a greater extent of study (i.e. more credits). Masters courses can generally be

awarded as a Pass, or with Merit or Distinction.

6. What does it mean if a course is accredited? Is that an advantage?

Accreditation usually means that a course has been approved as meeting a specific set of standards by a relevant professional body. Within any broad subject or career area, not all courses will be accredited. In many cases, if you want to pursue a career in that area, studying an accredited course is an advantage and in some cases may be necessary for professional recognition. Some accredited postgraduate courses include professional exams or additional qualifications within them, or are viewed as their equivalent (called exemptions) which may mean you don't have to take as many professional exams afterwards when you enter the career. It would be best to check with a relevant professional body to find out whether you can enter the career in that area from a non-accredited course. For example, you can get into HR without professional exams and membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), but these do help, as the CIPD will advise.

Not all accreditations are specifically linked to a professional association or career body – for example there are several accreditation schemes for business schools, which aim to give some guarantee of quality of the course (depending on which organisation accredits the course).

If you are thinking about postgraduate study to progress or enter a specific career, accreditation may be a crucial issue and it will be important to understand which accreditations are most relevant in that sector. Checking this out in advance could save you time and money later. So it may be helpful to check about accreditations with a careers adviser, the National Careers Service advice line, a specialised careers website such as Prospects, or the relevant professional association website.

7. What is the difference between one-year and two-year courses?

Although many UK postgraduate courses are one year in duration, certain courses, for example the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) are traditionally run over two years. Some are specifically designed with the needs of international students in mind, where the additional year helps bring students up to the required standard with language and other related study issues. If the course that interests you is advertised as a two-year course it is a good idea to ask how many credits are awarded at the end of the course and how that compares to a one-year course in the same department if one is offered. Some business courses offer work experience as part of the programme – although this means a longer course, it may be particularly valuable professionally to have this additional element, especially for international students.

8. How do distance learning courses work?

Distance learning usually means you do all or most of the study for the course at home, with contact with a tutor by email, phone or online. Increasingly the content of distance learning courses is delivered online, sometimes including online seminars or lectures, and often also

allowing students to communicate with each other through online forums. Generally you can study at a time of your own choosing but you may need to complete modules or course elements within a certain timeframe, and there may be specific time slots when teaching staff are available. Some but not all courses will also require attendance at a campus for a period each year, so it is a good idea to check out specific requirements like this and whether you could manage to get the time off (if you work) and travel to campus for these elements.

For some people, the commitments in their life mean that distance learning is the only study option feasible for them. If you do have a choice, an issue to consider is whether you feel that you are suited to working independently for the majority of the time, and have the required self-motivation to do so successfully, or whether you prefer studying (or need to) with other people in a classroom.

9. What does 'blended learning' mean?

This usually means that some of the course is taught on campus at the institution and part is delivered as distance learning or online, or via a variety of teaching methods. Check the balance for the course to see what is right for you.

10. What does 'modular study' mean?

Courses are often divided up into different elements, sometimes called modules. Usually this means that all students take a few 'core' modules and then choose additional modules to make up the required total credits required for the course, selecting them from a specified list. You may find yourself studying with one group of students for one module and a different set of students for another module, some of whom could be studying for a different course.

Useful Tip: Modular study can offer you choice and flexibility (this varies from course to course) but institutions often need a minimum number of students on any module in order to run it, so may only be able to confirm at short notice whether a particular module will be offered in a given academic year. You may find it helpful to ask the course director when they will be certain which modules are running, and to indicate those which are of most interest to you.

I want to undertake postgraduate research – do I need to do a taught postgraduate course first?

This is not a simple question to answer, because a very wide variety of people undertake postgraduate research towards a doctorate such as a PhD, and the situation also varies between different subjects. In some subjects, such as physical and biological sciences, a substantial proportion of those undertaking doctoral research progress to it either straight from their first degree or from a Masters, although there is some trend in the UK to preferring those

who have a Masters as they have proven experience of higher level study. Rarely, however, will it be a requirement. In some other subjects the majority come to research after a long period working and bring a variety of different experiences of study and work. The only way to answer the question will be to investigate the situation on the basis of your preferred discipline, and also your own career trajectory.

How and where should I study?

Your personal circumstances will determine how you can or want to study as well as where, but for some people where they study is absolutely critical. If you are already in the UK, are you prepared to move in order to study? Or do your circumstances – job, family, finances, personal factors – mean you need to stay where you currently live? And will you need to keep working while studying? If this is the case, there are lots of options including part-time courses, distance learning and combinations of modes of study, as well as full-time courses. If you can move, are you free to move anywhere, and would you consider studying in a different country?

Thinking about how postgraduate study could fit into your life is an important starting point, and the answers to some of these questions can help you decide which course providers to look at. Another issue to consider is how you like to learn; do you want the face-to-face conversation and connection with other students and staff that courses on campus can offer, or are you happy to study at a distance where more independent study is likely?

Ideas to Try: Make a list of the factors that could influence how and where you want to study – then put them in order of priority.

List the various types of study or other learning activity you currently undertake and whether you do them independently or with others, or a mix of the two. Which ones do you like, or dislike – and why? Would this also apply to how you would choose postgraduate study?

Is now the right time for me to study?

In the UK, you can study at postgraduate level whenever seems right to you – immediately after first degree, after a few years in work if you decide you need specialist knowledge, or any time later to help facilitate a career change, develop your knowledge or skills, or for general self-development. People studying postgraduate courses are a very diverse group and higher education institutions understand that postgraduate courses need to fit in around your life, rather than you fitting around their course.

What is important is whether you have the personal circumstances, time and motivation to study, and can raise the funds to pay for it.

Could I afford it?

In the UK, the cost of postgraduate courses can vary from subject to subject and from institution to institution. Depending on how and where you study, you may need to cover living expenses as well as course fees, and this is more expensive in some places or parts of the country than others.

Do you have your own money to put in, or do you need to find funding? Some institutions can provide funding assistance or bursaries, while for certain courses you may be able to apply for special bank loans for career development. Getting funding can be hard and you need to do your research into this – it is never too early to start looking for funding, whether that is related to the course you want to do, from your employer or from other external sources. Most institutions will have a funding section on their website, which is a good place to start.

It is also worth considering different types of study. Would you prefer studying full-time for a shorter period, or part-time or by another method for longer while still working to help finance your studies?

Which is the 'best' course or institution for me?

There is no simple answer to this question, which is really two questions, because what makes a course 'best' for one person may not be the case for another. The important thing is to find the course that is right for you in terms of content but also considering your personal circumstances; your circumstances could affect your choice of course and certainly are likely to affect your choice of institution.

Some people use league tables to help them make judgements about institutions but remember that these are overall evaluations of higher education institutions with a long list of criteria, many of which do not relate to postgraduate courses. The overall 'reputation' of an institution may be important to you, but not all offer the same courses or the same study options. Many who consider postgraduate study can only attend a local institution, for example, and/or study part-time, which restricts their options. Only when you consider options against your own criteria will you be able to decide which is the best course or institution for you.

What are my priorities?

Once you have thought about some of the issues above, you may find it helpful to make a list of the priorities you will want to keep in mind when choosing and comparing courses. Your list will be personal to you, and some things will be more important than others. Your list may change as you discover what the possibilities are and as you find out more about postgraduate study. It may not be practical to expect all your requirements to be met by one course, but your list of priorities will help focus your search.

Ideas to Try: Make a list of your priorities as they are now, with the date at the top, and rank them by their importance. Highlight any you are not sure about and any you think may change. Try this again when you have done some research and see if your answers have changed.

Which Stage 2 pathway should you follow? Select the pathway that most closely resembles your current situation. Are you:

A current UK student or recent graduate?

A current international student in the UK (or recent graduate who studied in the UK)?

A current student or recent graduate from outside the UK who has not studied in the UK before?

A UK graduate returning to postgraduate study several years after your first degree?

A graduate from outside the UK seeking postgraduate study several years after your first degree?

A potential student with professional qualifications and/or work experience, but no degree?