

2.1 Current UK students and recent graduates

If you are a current UK student or a recent UK graduate, and you are considering continuing to postgraduate study, these are some of the areas you may find it helpful to think about:

1. Is it better for me to do a postgraduate degree immediately after an undergraduate degree, or to wait for a few years?

This could depend on your motivation or your personal circumstances, or both. Reasons for continuing immediately or almost immediately could be that:

- you know the career sector you want to enter and a postgraduate course will help achieve it, and working experience is not necessary;
- you don't know what career you want and an extra year to think about career options could be useful;
- you have the funding, or a scholarship opportunity; and/or
- you don't want to lose momentum.

Reasons for waiting include:

- an uncertain career aim;
- the need to get some working experience to enter a particular career as well as the postgraduate qualification;
- time to get the funding together; and/or
- a break from formal study could do you good.

If you are aiming for a career pathway where a postgraduate course is a pre-requisite, such as some routes into teaching or social work, it will be important to know whether having specific work experience or other experience (other than academic study) is important. If your first degree gave you a good general basis within your subject area but you are aiming for a more specialised career, a postgraduate qualification may help that, and could help differentiate you in the jobs market, but many employers are as or more interested in your work experience. So you may find it more helpful to work for a few years and decide whether a specific postgraduate course could boost your career later on, or allow you to change direction. Your careers service and academics in your department should be able to help you discuss your options.

Ideas to Try: Make a list of your main reasons to move immediately on to a postgraduate degree and the main factors you think might be difficult about it. Then do the same with reasons and difficulties associated with waiting a few years – try to check them with a trusted adviser to make sure they are realistic. Which reasons are most important to you?

2. Is it better for me to stay at the same institution or move to a different one for postgraduate study?

There could be advantages for you in either strategy. Staying at the same institution could make sense if:

- you like where you are currently studying;
- there is a relevant course that you hear good reports about;
- there could be discounts on course fees for alumni; and/or
- you make good use of the opportunities you have to find out more 'from the inside'.

On the other hand, you might actively not want to stay, or a course somewhere different might be better, and there are often benefits of moving to a new and unfamiliar place in terms of challenge and experience.

It is a good idea to try to get a better idea of other possible institutions by talking to the course director and ideally to students, and if possible physically go there – institution websites will advertise their open days which are specifically for this purpose. The more informed a choice you make the more likely you are to be confident that you have chosen the right course and location for you.

Ideas to Try: Quiz yourself about how you would feel about moving to another institution, what you might gain, and what you might lose, and what worries you about either staying or moving. What extra information would you need to help you decide whether to stay or move?

3. Does the application system for postgraduate work the same as for undergraduate?

The application system for postgraduate courses is very different from applying for undergraduate study in the UK, where everybody uses UCAS. In most cases, you will need to make one application per course, per institution, for postgraduate courses. There is no central national system covering entry to all courses or institutions, although the UKPASS handles applications to a selection of institutions, and there are some common application schemes for certain professional/vocational courses including law, teaching, social work and clinical psychology. Generally each institution will have its own application system and could have its own deadlines. If you are applying to a range of institutions, application deadlines may differ widely, and there can even be different deadlines within one institution for different courses. Most but not quite all institutions have online application systems for postgraduate courses, although they may differ somewhat in the questions they ask.

4. Is there a postgraduate loans scheme for UK postgraduates as there is for undergraduates?

There is no national student loan scheme for postgraduate study, unlike for undergraduates, but there are some bank lending schemes through which you can apply to borrow money to attend certain courses. These will have different interest rates and some you have to pay back immediately after completing the course. Depending on how you study, you may need to find money both for fees and for living expenses. Both fees and living costs can vary substantially by institution, and the cost of courses can also vary within a single institution, depending on your subject area and the type of course. Institution websites will give course fees and often have useful information to help you find out about local costs of living. We also recommend that you look specifically at the Fees and Funding section in Stage 3 of this toolkit, for more about sources of information for postgraduate funding.

5. How hard are postgraduate courses and is the workload more intensive than undergraduate study?

If you struggled with your first degree, or did not enjoy working on a dissertation or similar part of it, knowing what postgraduate study entails could be critical. As you'd expect, a postgraduate-level course (including a Masters) will be at a higher level than an undergraduate course, so you could find it is more demanding and intensive than your first degree. There will be a lot of independent learning, so you will need to make time for additional work outside the classroom – although the extent to which this is the case will vary from course to course, as well as the mode of study (full- or part-time, campus or distance learning). So try to check whether the expectations of those on a course will suit you, both by looking at institutions' course web pages and by contact with academic teaching staff or students. You are likely to be introduced to a range of new ideas, and sometimes new ways of working, in a short period, so you will need to be prepared for an intensive start.

Ideas to Try: List any areas you have found most difficult while studying for your undergraduate degree. Mark those that you want to find out more about when choosing your postgraduate course.

6. What is life like as a postgraduate student?

Most institutions have fewer postgraduates than they do undergraduates, of whom many will be doing specialist courses with different timetables, and there could be a wider range of age and experience across each course cohort. This can mean that the postgraduate community you are part of is based primarily around your course and/or academic department. There are often postgraduate societies centred on a department or subject area, which may cater for both taught postgraduates and PhD students. Many students'

unions have specific officers with a postgraduate remit who are there to support the interests of postgraduate students.

7. What's the best way to find out about postgraduate study and whether it is right for me?

If you are currently a student, you have a great source of information on your doorstep, whether or not you decide to stay at the same institution for postgraduate study. Course providers will often run postgraduate events (chiefly promoting their own courses) and your careers service is likely to run information sessions about how to find out more about postgraduate study options and applying for them, which will be impartial. If your department does not run an information event about postgraduate study, you can ask individual academics, or administrators if you have practical questions, and you are in a great position to talk to current postgraduate students about their experiences. Finding out more about postgraduate study in your current institution may be good background even if you want to move, as it will give you a better idea of the questions to ask, of whom, and what is important to you.

Take a Look: The Finding Out More section in Stage 3 of this toolkit has more suggestions for where to look online and elsewhere for more information and opinions about courses.

8. Is postgraduate accommodation provided by institutions for UK students?

Most institutions have at least some postgraduate accommodation but it may not be enough for all postgraduate students. How many places are on offer can depend on the environment (for example, campus or non-campus) as well as the number of postgraduate students and the proportion who are international students new to the UK (and tend to be given priority, understandably). Institutions will generally set out their criteria for allocating postgraduate accommodation. They will often have additional lists of local landlords and may provide opportunities for new cohorts of postgraduate students to contact each other when looking for accommodation. If you are likely to want accommodation, or have particular accommodation needs, finding out from the Accommodation department what the institution offers at an early stage can be helpful for your planning purposes.