

## 2.4 UK graduates returning to postgraduate study several years after your first degree

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**If you are a UK graduate and you are considering returning to postgraduate study, having spent some time away from higher education, these are some of the areas you may find it helpful to think about:**

### **1. I have embarked on a career path – would a postgraduate qualification help me progress further?**

If you are seeking to advance in your existing career path then you may already know what you are looking for in a course. This could be more specialist knowledge in a particular area, or simply the boost that a higher level course in your area may give you, as well as the intrinsic interest of studying to a higher level in an area of personal appeal to you. You may find it helpful to talk with your employer or a professional association to consider possible career development paths you could take and what types of postgraduate qualifications could help you achieve that goal. If an employer is prepared to fund postgraduate study, that is a good indication that such a qualification will be useful. You may well be able to consult your former university's careers service, or you could pay for some professional coaching or guidance privately, or contact the National Careers Service helpline.

The institutions running specialist postgraduate courses in your career area may be able to advise you about the career progression of previous graduates following the course. You may be able to find alumni stories on institutions' course webpages who explain the career impact that they have achieved (although those will tend to be positive stories). You could also post the question to an online chat room or a Facebook group, although the responses you get back may not always be well informed.

*Useful to Know: Course and individual module descriptions should indicate the types of student for whom the course was designed. If there are student profiles, this may give you an idea of the variety and type of students who have done the course, but try to check how recent these are and if possible their background.*

### **2. I am thinking about a change in career direction – will a postgraduate course help?**

If you are contemplating a change in career direction, you should first explore your broad career options, before looking at specific courses. You would be wise to discuss options with the careers service from your previous institution (even if you no longer feel you have links

there), with a private career adviser or coach or the National Careers Service, or with a professional organisation in an area you are thinking about to learn what employers are looking for and the opportunities available. You may need to think about whether you could afford the time it will take to retrain, and a possible lower salary which may occur when you enter a new field, as well as the longer term 'return on investment'.

There are some specific conversion courses to help you enter new fields; in Stage 3 of this toolkit there is further information about the types of courses available and how to identify them.

### **3. How much does a postgraduate course cost and is there any funding?**

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.

### **4. Will I cope with academic study again, at postgraduate level? Is any support available?**

You may worry about this if you have been out of higher education for many years, or if you are considering studying at a different institution than the one at which you studied before, or if you feel certain aspects of the academic work could be challenging. Students undertaking postgraduate courses are very diverse including a wide age range, so institutions understand that they need to provide support for students who are returning to study after a period of time. Your preferred course(s) may well have other students also returning to study with the same issues and concerns.

Institutions want you to complete their course successfully and some may help you identify the skills you will need, and/or offer facilities or support to help you study. The study support offered by institutions may differ considerably so you may find it helpful to raise these concerns at an early stage. Although you could raise this with academics teaching the course, it might be better to ask others about study support. Talking to current students on the course who themselves had returned to study after a period away will also help you identify whether the support provided at a particular institution could help you.

*Ideas to Try: Think about the study skills you needed at undergraduate level and whether you still have these, even if you now use them in a different way. Which do you think you would need to improve? Also think about the types of skills you have acquired since you left your previous institution, gained at work or elsewhere, and which could be useful in postgraduate study. Check course descriptions on the institution websites to see if any skills are required and which additional skills you might need to develop.*

## **5. Will I fit in with other students on the course?**

Student profiles provided by the institution providing the course may give you some idea of the students on the course, but are unlikely to represent the full range (and are likely to reflect those they want and/or who did particularly well). As above, talking to current students on courses you are considering will give you some indication of the range of students on the course, as well as the social side and academic support offered. It can be useful to ask academic staff teaching the course the typical number of students on the course, their background (age, gender, nationality, work experience) and the typical mix of students in any given year. Undertaking a course with a variety of students from different nationalities and backgrounds with varied experiences can be both interesting and very valuable especially if you want an international career. Some see the high ‘cosmopolitanism’ of many UK postgraduate courses to be a real benefit of studying in the UK.

*Useful to Know: Some course providers provide online communities for students applying for a particular course before the course starts, so you can start to get to know others who may be on your course.*

## **6. Is it better for me to study at my previous institution or move to a different one for postgraduate study?**

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

- you liked where you studied before;
- there is a relevant course that you hear good reports about; and/or
- there could be discounts on course fees for alumni.

However, your institution may have changed substantially if you have been ‘away’ a long time. And on the other hand, you might actively not want to return, or a course somewhere different might be better and/or that institution have a better reputation. There may be some benefits of moving to a new and unfamiliar place in terms of challenge and experience.

However, for many considering return to postgraduate study, how it fits into your existing life and responsibilities may well be the key issue. Many who have commitments to job, family and home are only able to consider a ‘local’ institution.

Depending on this, 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?*

## **7. I can't move location to study – how will this limit my options?**

If you cannot relocate to study, you will really need to consider two important factors together – course content and how you prefer to study and learn. If the course content is paramount, and a local institution cannot offer the course content you are looking for, you may need to consider an alternative mode of study like distance learning, or a blend where there is only restricted commitment to attending teaching on campus. However, you will need to decide whether studying this way will suit you, particularly if you have not done it before. You may find it helpful to consult as widely as possible on this issue, in particular talking to the course teachers and to students who have done the course you are thinking of in this way.

On the other hand, if there are different providers of courses that will be equally valuable to you, then you can choose the location and type of study you think will suit you best and fit in with your current lifestyle and commitments.

*Useful to Know: There is further information on distance learning study in Stage 3 of this toolkit in the section on types of courses available.*

## **8. What are my options if I need to fit postgraduate study around my job and/or family?**

Increasingly, institutions providing postgraduate courses understand that courses need to be flexible enough to fit in around commitments to work and family, but this can vary widely between different institutions (and even between different courses from a single provider). Many UK postgraduates study part-time and flexibly, in order to continue working and living at home. For many courses there will be multiple delivery options, although some vocational courses have to be studied full-time, and distance learning is an increasingly popular alternative.

If you have particular constraints on your time, it can be helpful to talk to the course provider as early as possible in your research to find out which courses have the flexibility or arrangements you need, and which do not. Even part-time courses may require study on

different days in different semesters or terms and for modular courses the course provider may not be able to accommodate all preferences so students may need to be flexible to study what they want, so asking the course provider about timetabling throughout the course may be important. Ultimately, if there is a course you really want to do but your circumstances make this practically difficult, you may need to consider delaying until your circumstances change and make it more realistic, if that is likely to be possible.

*Ideas to Try: Identify the practical constraints and other factors that could affect your choice of course, and who else in your life (e.g. work or family) would be affected in each case. Rank these in order by which factor may be easiest to resolve or change; for example, will your employer allow you to vary or reduce your hours for the duration of the course? Could other family members look after children at specific times when you would be studying?*

## 9. How should I choose between different study options for the same course?

As an example, this could be a choice between stopping work to undertake a one-year full-time course or studying it part-time over two years while remaining at work. Your thinking will probably combine a number of factors relating to your current work, your future career aspirations, your finances and your other personal circumstances and preferences. If you are free to make either choice, then there can be advantages either way.

Taking a year off work and immersing yourself in study means you will complete the course faster and you may find it enjoyable to be able to focus fully on the course. On the other hand there are financial risks; you have to pay the course fees and living expenses during a year without income and, however good the employment record for course graduates, few institutions will say the course will guarantee you a job immediately after graduation. Collectively this option has substantial risks unless your employer has held your job open for you, but you may be doing the course in order to change job anyway. If you do want to change job, doing a full-time course would mean you would become available to start work full-time in your new area sooner.

If you study part-time, the course will take longer but if you can continue to work whilst studying you will find it easier financially. If there is flexibility in the course and your current employer allows, you may be able to remain in your current job whilst studying, or reduce your hours. For some courses, you might be able to apply what you have learnt immediately you learn it and start to get that benefit earlier. If you have other major factors to consider, such as family or dependants to care for, then part-time study may offer you the flexibility you need and allow you time for both.

How you balance the issues will be unique to you, your circumstances and priorities. In reality, there is a wider range of options, right through to some students who study full-time and also work either full- or part-time, because not all full-time courses are every day and/or take place 9-5.

*Ideas to Try: Make a list of the pros and cons – for you – of full-time and part-time study and allocate scores based on which issues matter most in your life.*

## **10. 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.