

2.5 Graduates from outside the UK seeking postgraduate study several years after first degree

If you are a graduate from outside the UK who has not previously studied in the UK and are now considering postgraduate study after some years doing something else, 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 UK postgraduate qualifications could help you achieve that goal. Some professional qualifications are UK-specific so you need to check that they are relevant in your own country. If an employer is prepared to fund such 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 careers guidance privately.

The institutions running specialist postgraduate courses in your career area will also have ideas about this in relation to careers in the UK, but may not know much about careers in your country and will naturally promote their own 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).

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 careers adviser/coach or with a professional organisation in the field 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'.

3. I have never studied in the UK before – will I need a visa?

If you are from an EU or European Economic Area (EEA) country, you should not need a visa to study in the UK at postgraduate level at a recognised higher education institution, but if you are from outside the EU you will need a visa. The rules about applying for visas to study at postgraduate level in the UK can change, so you will need to check carefully before you start applying and you will need to leave yourself plenty of time to apply for the visa as well as for the courses you are interested in. When you have received offers from institutions, you will need to accept one particular course offer as the visa system generally requires the visa to be issued for study in one particular institution or course. If you are applying via an agent or an educational adviser who works with the institutions you are interested in, they will be able to advise you about this. Institutions' websites and International Offices should also be able to advise you.

4. How does the application system work for postgraduate courses?

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 scheme 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, but there can also 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 and some may ask for a CV or resumé too.

5. How do UK postgraduate-level degrees compare with those from other countries?

In many cases, postgraduate or Masters-level courses in the UK are well respected internationally and can be popular in the international jobs arena. They can differ in some important ways from postgraduate courses in other countries. One of the main differences is in the length of the course because most full-time Masters courses in the UK are studied over one year, whereas in many other countries they often take two years or more. If after your taught postgraduate course you are planning to progress to higher level study (such as doctoral research) outside the UK, you may find it wise to check with that country to ensure that the UK course will be a sufficient entry qualification.

If you are from a European country and want to understand how many ECTS credits a particular UK course is equivalent to, you should check with the institution. If you want to work in another country after your postgraduate course, you may wish to check with some key employers that you might want to work for about how they view a postgraduate degree.

6. If I take a postgraduate course in the UK, will I be able to work in the UK?

If you are from an EU country, you should be allowed to work subject to any restrictions that are in place in relation to your specific country.

If you are of non-EU nationality and studying a full-time postgraduate course, the current regulations of the relevant Tier 4 visa permit you to work for up to 20 hours per week during term time, and to work full-time during vacations (but not necessarily the summer vacation, depending on the course). You can also undertake a work placement if it is a formal part of your course. It will be important to ask potential course providers whether a work placement is a formal part of the course, because if it is not, then you may not be able to gain some valuable types of work experience such as an internship or work placement.

Provided you have studied a course of at least 12 months in length, your Tier 4 visa should expire four months after your course completion date (or after two months for a shorter course). During this period you can continue to work full-time subject to the student employment restrictions including those above, so you cannot take up a permanent job. At the end of the period you must either leave the UK or have applied for another visa, such as being sponsored by an employer for a working (Tier 2) visa, although you can continue to work while the UK Border Agency processes the application.

It is important to consult the UK Border Agency website about visas and working restrictions; links can be found in Stage 3 of the toolkit to the UKBA website and also to agencies providing good guidance such as UKCISA and the British Council.

7. What is it like undertaking a postgraduate course in the UK?

Depending on where you are from, there could be a big difference between studying for your undergraduate degree in your own country (or another country) and for a postgraduate degree in the UK such as a Masters. Many students find the differences very stimulating but some find it quite a challenge especially at the start. Many postgraduate courses in the UK are very focused and intensive, introducing new ideas and often new ways of working right from the beginning, as well as at the high level of study that you would expect to be required. Most UK postgraduate courses are one year in duration, whereas many outside the UK take two years or more. This means there is a lot to fit into a one-year course, and you will need to make time for substantial independent study work outside the classroom, even on a full-time course.

You may also find that the teaching style is different from what you are used to, depending on where you previously studied. Postgraduate students in the UK are encouraged to participate actively in seminars and teaching sessions, and you will get more out of the course if you are able to join in the debate, ask questions and put forward your own opinions. Although every course varies, the atmosphere can be quite informal, and depending on the size of the course students may be encouraged to challenge each others' ideas and those of the course tutors, as well as putting forward their own ideas.

When you apply for each course, the level of English language required will be stated as part of the entry requirements. Most institutions have general requirements, with specific additional requirements for some courses. As part of the course you may be required to write reports and essays – many institutions offer courses in academic writing for students whose first language is not English, as well as other language support. If you are concerned about your language skills, you can ask the institutions you are considering about the English language support and other study support that they offer. Sometimes they offer short courses before the postgraduate course begins, and/or during the period of study itself.

Ideas to Try: Talk to other students from your own country who have studied at postgraduate level in the UK – ask them what surprised them the most about studying in the UK or what they thought was most different or challenging compared with studying in your own country.

8. What is life like as a postgraduate student?

UK higher education institutions offer a great deal of support to international students who have not previously studied in the UK. You will be sent information before you arrive, which will tell you what to expect and will also include practical information about travel and where you should go when you arrive at the institution. Some Institutions, depending on their location, will meet students at local stations or airports. There is usually an induction programme for non-UK students on arrival, so you will have plenty of opportunity to meet other students right from the start. If you are staying in the institution's accommodation you will immediately meet other international and UK students there. Once your course starts,

you will find an additional social network with other students on your course or within your department. The number and type of students on UK postgraduate courses can vary a lot, so you may want to ask before applying whether most students on the course are also international or UK students.

You will also be introduced to the Students' Union, which includes the main social centre for students in a UK institution. This is used by both undergraduate and postgraduate students and will have clubs and societies. There are often postgraduate societies centred on a department or subject, which may cater for both taught postgraduates and PhD students. There may also be a society for students from your particular country or region where you can meet others, generally including both undergraduates and postgraduates. You will probably also find that your institution will run a particular induction for students from outside the UK – although this may not be only for postgraduates. Many students' unions have a specific International Officer and/or Postgraduate Officer with the remit to support the interests of these students. The institution will also have facilities to cater for faith or religious needs.

Ideas to Try: Ask the institution you are considering if you can contact any current postgraduate students from your own country to learn about their experiences.

9. How do the fees work at postgraduate level, and are there any loans?

Postgraduate course fees can vary widely by subject, even within one institution, but in general, students from the EU are charged under one band of fees, and students from other countries under a different fee band. If you are in any doubt about how you are classified for fee purposes, you should check this with the Admissions department or International Office of an institution you are considering.

There is no loan scheme in the UK available for postgraduates from outside the UK, but there may be schemes in your home country. You will need to have sufficient money for course fees and living expenses. Both fees and costs of living can vary substantially by institution. It's usually best to consult potential institutions' websites to find out about course fees and also local costs of living. In some cases the institution may offer bursaries for students from certain countries or other funding help; this is not always obvious from the website so ask the International Office.

Take a Look: The Fees and Funding section in Stage 3 of this toolkit can tell you more about sources of information for postgraduate funding.

10. Will I be provided with accommodation?

Most institutions have at least some postgraduate accommodation but there may not be enough for all international 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 are likely to have some accommodation especially for families if you are bringing dependants, and 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.

11. If I have additional questions about studying in the UK, whom should I ask?

Most institutions have support services for their students including an International Office with staff who will be happy to help and advise you as an international student on anything related to studying in the UK, so don't be afraid to ask for help. There is also a list of organisations and contacts in Stage 3 of this toolkit which you may find helpful for general questions. The institutions you are considering may also be able to put you in touch with current international students, including from your own country, so that you can ask them about their experiences of studying there.