

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

If you would like to study at postgraduate level but do not have an undergraduate degree, these are some issues you may find it helpful to think about.

1. I don't have an undergraduate degree but I want to do a postgraduate course – is this possible and where?

Some course providers (institutions) state clearly in their course entry requirements that they are also prepared to consider applications from potential students with substantial work experience in the area. This depends on the subject area – for example it may be more common for business courses but rarer in the sciences. Usually they will want you to provide evidence of specific experience or skills in a particular relevant area. Another entry option could be a higher education qualification that is not a degree (such as HND or HNC in the UK) together with working experience. Professional qualifications can also sometimes be accepted.

Even if the course provider does not mention this, if you are interested in a particular course it is always worth asking if your experience would be sufficient. If they cannot help you, they may know of other course providers who might or could recommend an undergraduate course or other study options instead.

Useful to Know: On institution websites, look out for courses or areas of the website which mention Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). This will tell you whether the institution accepts alternative study or experience and in what circumstances.

Ideas to Try: Before approaching an institution, make a list of any qualifications you do have and also major pieces of work or research you have done, or specific skills you can provide evidence for that might be relevant to the course that interests you. Try to link your experience to the modules that you would study – it will look good if you have done this kind of preparation.

2. How do I find out which course providers accept students in this way?

You may find the easiest way to approach this is to look for courses you want to do, and then contact the institutions and simply ask them, as not all of them will make it clear on their websites and your combination of background and experience is unique to you. Some institutions will be flexible but this very much depends on the course and how much knowledge is needed to undertake it. Previous degree-level study may be a prerequisite and

this could be part of the accreditation of a course by a professional body. There are so many variations across postgraduate study that it is impossible to generalise, so the best idea is to do some research about the course topics and if your skills and experience are relevant then ask and make your case.

3. Will I cope with this level of study? 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 having 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 have acquired through your previous study, work or other activities, and which might be useful in postgraduate study. Check course descriptions on the institution websites to see what skills are required and which additional skills you might need to develop.

4. 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.

5. What kind of career advancement will a postgraduate course really offer me?

Unfortunately you are unlikely to find a simple answer to this important question. Successful completion of a postgraduate level course should provide you with a specific, high-level academically or professionally recognised qualification (especially if it is accredited), as well as new knowledge and skills. However, the impact of this on your specific career will depend on the course and qualification, the state of your career sector and especially how it interrelates with your own experiences, aspirations and drive.

To get an idea of how it could benefit your own career, you could try asking your current employer and/or a professional organisation in your sector, or a careers adviser/coach. You could ask institutions if you can make contact with recent graduates from courses you are considering to see if any had similar backgrounds to you and will share experiences about the benefits they have experienced.

6. How does the application system for postgraduate study work?

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.