

Stage 3: Obtaining information, possible questions to ask, information sources

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3.1 Information sources and communicating with institutions (course providers)

1. How can I find out what courses there are available in a particular subject area?

There are a number of UK postgraduate 'portal' websites which can be helpful as they bring together information from many institutions into one place. Potentially this is a quicker way to see what's available in your subject area, make a shortlist, and then consult your preferred institutions' websites and contact them for more information. They are likely to have more comprehensive results than a search engine.

These sites work by institutions sending them information and updating it, so there may be gaps or out-of-date information. The Prospects site collects information most systematically from institutions. However, the range of information on each site varies, so it is important not to rely on just one portal. Some, such as Prospects, allow you to search for specific topics within modules. Searching for a topic may identify courses with content which may otherwise be masked by a broader course title.

Note that the UKPASS site is focused upon a number of institutions which use this joint application scheme, so will emphasise results for those institutions.

Useful to Know: Like many commercial websites, institutions may pay to advertise their courses on some of these portal sites, which can result in their course appearing more prominently on that website. It is important to search them carefully in case other courses that fit your criteria are less well promoted.

See below for a list of the most established portal websites for UK courses.

2. What happens at a postgraduate study fair?

There are currently two major 'drop-in' postgraduate study fairs each year in the UK, in November (in Manchester) and January (in London), plus some smaller regional fairs at various times. The big fairs have 90 or more institutions exhibiting, as well as stands from other organisations about funding, careers and other relevant issues. They usually also have talks about different aspects of postgraduate study, and sometimes offer careers advice sessions too. The smaller fairs typically have 20-40 institutions taking part. Fairs are a good place to pick up an institution's prospectus and make initial contact with them in person. The institutions' staff at the fair should be able to answer general questions but will probably have to put you in touch with specific academic teaching staff to answer detailed questions about individual courses. Institutions may list which fairs they are attending on their websites, so you can check to see if the key ones for you will be there.

Ideas to Try: If you are planning to visit a postgraduate fair, try making a list of the questions to ask each organisation and the list of institutions you'd most like to talk to, before you go. It

will save time if you research what those institutions offer before making your list of questions.

See below for links to the main postgraduate fairs

3. On an institution website, where should I look for information about postgraduate courses?

The home page may have a Postgraduate link or tab where all the information about postgraduate study is collected together (often both taught and research). Otherwise, look for Prospective Students or Study links or tabs as the best place to start.

4. I want to talk to somebody at the institution who knows about this course – what’s the best way to do that?

On the course pages of most institution websites there should be either an online directory which provides a point of contact or a direct email address. This may be the course director or other teaching staff on the course, or the admissions administrator for that course, or a more central institution contact. Not all these people will be able to answer your specific questions: for example, if you have non-standard qualifications and want to know whether you would be eligible for entry, not everybody would know this. So you may want to ask for direct e-mail details of the right academic teaching person who could answer your specific questions.

You could also look out for online chat sessions or webinars run by the institution, which will usually be featured on the website along with details of open days coming up. There may also be options to contact them via social media such as Facebook, but this may not reach the person you want to consult.

5. How do I talk to current postgraduate students at an institution?

Many institutions have open days where current students will be available for you to talk to. You can also look out for online forums and chat sessions or social media groups run by the institution in your subject area. Some institutions offer an email contact system and can put you in touch with current students in your subject area or region (for international students). There may also be graduate groups you could contact using Linked-in (especially for business courses). If none of those is offered, contact the department running the course and ask if they can help you contact students or recent graduates.

6. What other sources of information about postgraduate courses are there?

University careers services can be another very helpful source of information and advice about postgraduate courses, so preferably try contacting the careers service at the

institution where you did your undergraduate degree – even if this was some years ago – or the nearest institution to you. The Prospects website has a list of all university careers services and their contact details. Some professional association websites offer help and advice about relevant courses and choices. You can find out about what other students think about postgraduate study in general, and sometimes individual courses in particular, on various online student forums and social networking sites but you should not rely on these alone for advice because the opinions given are not always up-to-date or accurate.

7. I submitted a question using an enquiry form on an institution website – how long will it take for them to reply?

This varies from institution to institution, but you should generally expect an answer in a few days or a week at most. If you don't get an answer, try contacting the institution by phone and ask to speak to somebody dealing with postgraduate courses in the relevant faculty or academic department.

Established postgraduate portal websites for postgraduate courses

www.Prospects.ac.uk

www.FindaMasters.com

www.MastersCompare.co.uk

www.TargetCourses.co.uk

www.UKPASS.ac.uk

Postgraduate study fairs

Manchester - <http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/students/events/postgraduatestudyfair/>

London - <http://pgmba.gradsintocareers.co.uk/>

Regional fairs - <http://targetcourses.co.uk/content/postgraduate-study-and-funding-fairs>

Other useful websites

The Postgraduate Forum <http://www.postgraduateforum.com/>

The Student Room Postgraduate Forum
<http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/forumdisplay.php?f=100>

TalkPostgrad www.Facebook.com/TalkPostgrad

3.2 Asking about course teaching and content

The answers to the questions below should ideally be provided for individual courses on an institution's website, or you can ask course teaching staff at the institution directly.

1. How is the course taught?
2. What course start date options are available?
3. How long is the course?
4. What are the differences between full-time or part-time study of this course?
5. Over what period and when is the part-time course delivered?
6. If I need to change from full-time to part-time study, or vice versa, is that possible?
7. What is the overall purpose of the course and why is it different from other courses in the same subject area offered by this institution?
8. How much choice is there for modules or other areas of the course?
9. Could I sit in on other modules of interest even if I don't do the exam or an assignment for them?
10. How much of the course is a research or other type of project?
11. How is the course assessed? Are all modules assessed by exams, or is there assessed coursework?
12. What is the mix of contact time in classes, seminars or labs, in relation to private study?
13. What are the specific modules or elements that make up this course?
14. Where can I find descriptions of each module or part of the course?
15. When will you know which modules are definitely available for the year I want to study?
16. Which days each week will I need to attend the institution and for how many hours?
17. What general academic support is offered for this course?

If you are returning to postgraduate study after a break, look out for academic writing courses or general study support. If you are an international student, look out for language courses and academic writing courses for international students – these may happen before the course starts (pre-sessional) and could cost extra. You may also need to check whether the visa you are applying for covers any pre-sessional course you may want to attend.

Additional questions about distance, online, or blended learning courses

18. Can I study entirely in my own time or do I have to follow certain course elements at specific times?
19. How is the teaching provided for this course – does it include online lectures where you can see or listen to the lecturer or is it all documentary?

20. What type of contact and support is available on this course? Is it provided by course tutors or administrators?
21. Is the support on offer 24/7 or only at set times, and if so, when?
22. Are there any student forums or other ways of communicating with other students doing the course at the same time?
23. What kind of equipment or internet connection will I need to follow the course successfully?
24. Will I need to come to the institution in person and if so how often and for how long?

3.3 Asking about career impact

Answers to these may be provided for individual courses on the institutions' websites or, more likely, you may have to ask the institution directly, or obtain some of the information by talking to previous students.

1. What is the typical career benefit from taking this course, for somebody like me [specifying your circumstances in terms of career direction, position and age]?
2. Is it possible to contact directly some graduates who were in a similar position to me and undertook the course, to find out about the career benefit for them and their experiences?
3. Are there opportunities to contact current students or recent graduates from the course using social media, to ask them questions online and share experiences?
4. Do you have employment destinations information for graduates from this specific course for the last few years?
Information on the jobs that graduates are in around six months after graduation is routinely collected by the institution for the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), but may not be openly published at the course level.
5. Is this course accredited by any professional bodies, and would it give me any additional professional qualifications/status and/or exempt me from any professional body exams?
6. Does the course have a related work experience element, such as an internship or placement?
 - a. What proportion of students on the course undertakes an internship or placement?
 - b. Of those, what proportion is offered a job at the end of the course by the placement company?
 - c. Would I need to organise the placement myself or does the institution either organise it for me or at least help me?
 - d. If there is no placement scheme, would it be important to try to get some work experience before, during or after the course, in order to increase the career benefit of the course itself?
7. To what extent is there interaction with industry or employers during the course, such as guest speakers?

3.4 Asking about funding and finance

Answers to the questions below should ideally be provided on the institution's website, either under course information or its Fees and Funding section, or you can ask the institution directly.

1. What are the course fees? (or) When will you publish the course fees for the coming academic year?
2. Is there a fee to make an application?
3. Is it necessary to pay a deposit in advance?
4. When and how do I pay the fees? Can I pay fees by instalments?
5. Is there a discount for alumni (graduates) of this institution on postgraduate course fees?
6. Are there any additional fees or charges related to the course, such as for equipment or field trips or similar?
7. Does the department, institution or region offer bursaries, scholarships or studentships? Is there a website or directory with these details?
8. Are there any bursaries, scholarships or studentships specifically for international students or those from my country?
9. If I want to apply for a bursary, scholarship or studentship, how do I do this?
10. How have other recent students managed to fund their course?
11. Do I need to apply separately for the course and for the funding?
12. Does the course application form require me to have funding or to confirm that I will be funding the course myself?
13. Is hardship funding offered for postgraduates and can I use it to pay my fees?
14. What are living expenses like for postgraduates at this institution?
15. Where can I find information about living expenses in this area?
16. Do I have to prove I have funds for the course either for fees or living expenses or both?
17. Is there support if I need to find part-time work to help fund my study? Will the hours of the course allow for this?

Related questions:

18. Where can I find additional information about funding for postgraduates from organisations outside the institution?

There are websites which include information about funding offered by other organisations – the most common ones for both UK/EU and International students are listed below.

19. Does the UK government offer funding for postgraduate courses?

The UK government does sometimes offer funding for certain courses through schemes which are administered through individual institutions, so you would apply to the institution. These are generally but not always for UK or EU students. Funding for students in Scotland can be different to the rest of the UK – see the SAAS website below.

20. Are postgraduate study loans available?

There is no specific national scheme of postgraduate study loans as there is for undergraduate study. Career Development Loans exist and although these are at preferential rates of interest they are offered commercially by banks, so have quite strict rules. You should expect to be able to demonstrate that the course you are intending to follow is related to your chosen career, and you may have to start paying back immediately you complete the course (unlike an undergraduate student loan). There are also some specific loan schemes for those studying law, or for an MBA etc.

21. I am a disabled student – is there any funding for disabled postgraduates?

There is some financial support for living expenses, particularly those related to your disability – see the section below.

Funding websites

Some of these websites include funding for undergraduates and others, rather than just for postgraduates. It should be clear whether funding is available for UK/EU students, or for international students, or both. Many universities will have a general section on funding on their website as well as specific information about scholarships and bursaries, and often a search facility.

Family Action <http://www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=21211>

Directory of Grant Making Trusts

<http://www.dsc.org.uk/Publications/Fundraisingsources/@132337> (book purchase required or copies can be found in libraries)

The Grants Register <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=544000>

Postgraduate Studentships <http://www.PostgraduateStudentships.co.uk>

Prospects http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding_postgraduate_study.htm

Student Awards Agency for Scotland <http://www.saas.gov.uk>

Scholarship Search <http://www.scholarship-search.org.uk/>

“Ultimate Postgraduate Funding Guide” www.graduates.co.uk

Many postgraduate portal websites carry advertisements for funding from institutions or have sections relating to postgraduate funding.

Additional resources for information and support

UKCISA – the UK Council for International Student Affairs -

<http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/International-Students/Fees-Student-Support-Money/>

UK government funding advice pages: <https://www.gov.uk/funding-for-postgraduate-study>

Career Development Loans information <https://www.gov.uk/career-development-loans>

Scholarships run by the UK government for international students

<https://www.gov.uk/browse/education/student-finance/scholarships-for-overseas-students>

Disabled student allowances: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas/overview>

3.5 Asking about course applications

Answers to the questions below should ideally be provided on the institutions' websites, or you can ask the institution directly, but note the point on central application systems below.

1. How do I apply for this course at this institution?
2. I'm applying for more than one course at this institution; do I have to make separate applications?
3. What is the application deadline?
4. I want to do this course but I don't have the correct entry requirements – can I still apply or what alternative qualifications do I need?
5. How soon will I hear whether I am accepted onto the course or not?
6. How long does the application process take and how does it work?
7. How can I check on the progress of my application?
8. Do I have to pay a deposit and if so, how much is it? Do I get it back?
9. Do I have to pay an application fee, and if so, how much is it? Do I get it back?
10. If I want to apply for a bursary, scholarship or studentship, how do I do this?
11. Do I need to apply separately for the course and for the funding?

Related questions

12. Can I use a central applications system for courses at different institutions?

No. You will generally need to apply to each institution individually, unless the institution is part of the UKPASS scheme (a portal for some institutions) or there is a common application scheme for the subject (as is the case for law, teaching, social work, and clinical psychology), although you will still have to provide some application information for each individual course. For institutions not in these schemes, you will need to apply for each course separately, although individual institutions may have an online system where you can input information common to all the courses you are applying to at that institution.

13. I am applying to a number of courses – if I get several offers, how many can I accept at once?

For most subjects, if you are a UK or EU student you can apply for as many as you like, and depending on whether a deposit is required, accept all the offers you wish to and make a final decision nearer the course starting date. However, within the common application schemes you cannot accept everything. Some institutions will have requirements about when they need a definite decision from you, and other deadlines.

If you are an international student and need to apply for a visa to study in the UK, you can apply to as many courses and institutions as you like, but you will only be able to accept one offer and will need to apply for a visa specifically for study at that institution. The institution will issue you with a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) confirming that you have been offered a place and have accepted it, which you will need to make your visa application in plenty of time before your course starts. The exact rules for how to apply for a visa and what you will need change from time to time – see the Resources section below for the most reliable source of information.

14. My undergraduate degree result was not as good as I expected. What can I do?

Some courses have very specific entry requirements but others have more flexibility. If you are really interested in a course but think you may not have reached the required standard, it may still be worth talking to the course director and explaining additional factors about why your results were not as good as you had hoped. If you obtained good results in particular modules or sections of your degree, or have relevant work experience that relates to the course, you should point that out. The course director or similar staff may help you with other suggestions even if they are not able to offer you a place on their course, or they may advise you to try other courses or part-time options. Consulting a careers adviser at this time would also be wise, as they are impartial and may have seen similar situations.

Additional resources for information and support

Visas and immigration –

<https://www.gov.uk/browse/visas-immigration/student-visas>

Education UK (British Council) – advice for international students –

<http://www.educationuk.org/global/sub/higher-education/>

UKCISA – the UK Council for International Student Affairs - <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk>

List of institutions participating in UKPASS -

<http://www.ukpass.ac.uk/students/howtoapply/institutions>

Postgraduate Application Management tool, free for students:

<http://www.MyPostgradApps.com>

Common applications schemes

For Social Work MA courses, applications must be made through UCAS: <http://www.ucas.ac.uk>

For Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualifications, applications must be made through the Graduate Teacher Training Registry (GTTR): <http://www.gttr.ac.uk>

For the Graduate Diploma in Legal Studies (or CPE) applications must be made through the Law Central Application board: <http://www.lawcabs.ac.uk>

For clinical psychology, applications must be made to the Clearing House for Postgraduate Courses in Clinical Psychology: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/chpccp/>

3.6 Some other practical questions

1. Is parking available at the institution for postgraduate students?
2. I need to organise childcare in order to be able to study – can the institution help?
3. How much accommodation is provided for postgraduate students and what criteria are used to decide who will get it?
4. Is there designated family accommodation if I want to bring my family with me?
5. What is the process for applying for accommodation as a postgraduate at this institution and how much does it cost?
6. How far away from the institution is other accommodation usually located?
7. Where is the institution located, and what is the best way to travel there?
8. Where can I find out more about the area around the institution and the facilities it has to offer?
9. What social facilities and societies are run by the institution specifically for postgraduates and where can I find out about them?