



Great jobs for bright people



Masters Application Tips & Advice

Your guide to applying for postgraduate courses to pursue an academic career

1 Introduction

There are many motivations for undertaking postgraduate study, and many reasons that you might be thinking about applying for a postgraduate degree. In this increasingly competitive graduate jobs market, a postgraduate degree can give you a considerable advantage over competitors, while it can also provide you with the chance to explore a topic in more detail, extending your academic career.

Some postgraduate courses are very academic in nature, and often involve an extended piece of research and writing, whereas others are more vocational and will provide training for a particular career path.

This ebook takes you through every aspect of applying for a postgraduate degree, from your initial thoughts and motivations through to the research proposal and funding application. The ebook aims to offer some advice and suggestions to potential postgraduate students from all backgrounds and disciplines, and to anyone at any stage hoping to undertake an academic career. Along the way, the ebook provides an action plan for your next steps along your route to becoming a postgraduate student, and eventually an academic, and draws on advice from current and past postgraduate students. Happy reading... and good luck!



Included in this ebook are the following sections:

- [Thinking of further study and an academic career?](#)
- [What is an academic career path?](#)
- [What is life like as an academic?](#)
- [Making the transition from undergrad student to academic](#)
- [Planning your application for further study](#)
- [Identifying skills needed to conduct postgraduate work](#)
- [Is it worth doing a masters?](#)
- [Choosing a course](#)
- [The applications process](#)
- [Searching for funding](#)
- [Writing your funding application](#)
- [Case studies](#)

Also included are some simple but effective activities including a postgraduate applications action plan, a postgraduate skills grid and a postgraduate application SWOT analysis.

2 Who should read this ebook?

This ebook is for anyone thinking of applying to a Masters degree, in any discipline and at any institution including:

- Current undergraduate students, mature students or potential career changers
- Anyone interested in undertaking an academic career in the future
- Current Masters students thinking about a PhD

However, the ebook may also be of interest to:

- Lecturing or teaching staff at higher education level, including those acting as personal tutors, postgraduate admissions tutors
- Professional staff working in postgraduate recruitment and admissions

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So you're thinking of further study? And perhaps an academic career?

At any time in life, postgraduate study can offer an attractive opportunity to enhance your skillset and gain new experiences. It can also, for many people, provide the springboard to gaining employment in the higher education sector as an academic. But how do you get there? What routes should you take? This section of the ebook takes you through some potential career paths to becoming an academic, while also offering some suggestions on making the transition between undergraduate and postgraduate study, at both Masters and PhD level.



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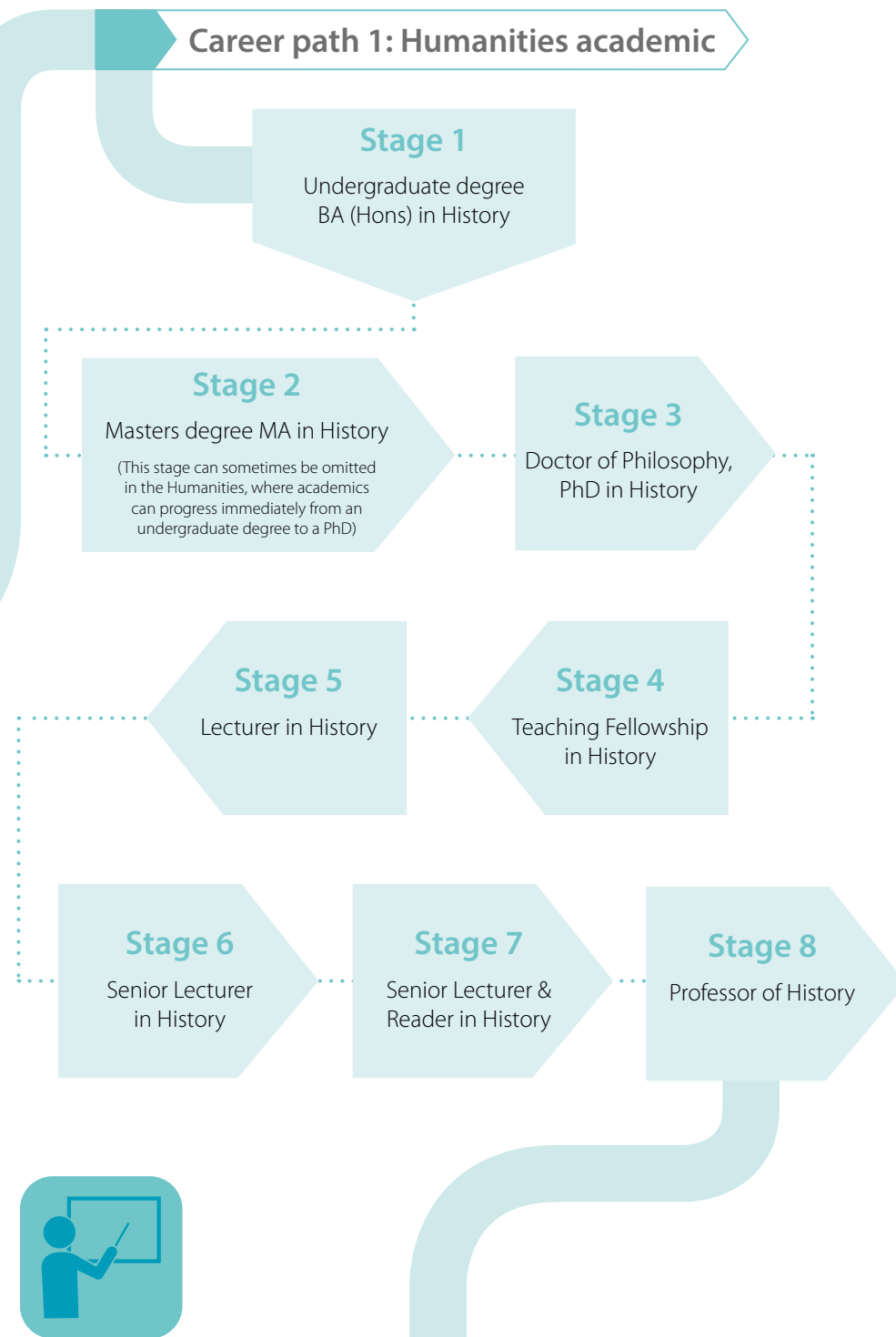
Who, or what, is an academic?

An academic is essentially anyone who would class themselves as a 'scholar' of a particular subject. While most academics have completed an extended piece of original research, often in the form of a PhD thesis, others might have gained skills and experience in a professional setting. All academics have progressed through various stages of study, from an undergraduate degree, through some form of Masters course, and in many cases the completion of some form of doctorate. Academics work within or around the higher education sector, often working at universities. In many cases, academics provide the teaching body of a university, as well as contributing to an institution's research culture and its overall administration. At the most basic level, undergraduate students are taught by academics combining the dual skills of teaching and research.

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What is an academic career path?

There is, of course, no such thing as a 'typical' career path. Some academics might never have dreamed of working in the higher education sector, while others might have always wanted to become a researcher. Certain conditions certainly help to facilitate an academic career: receiving funding to support postgraduate study (covered later in this ebook), for example, can make a huge difference to the career ambitions of an aspiring academic, while receiving support from an individual supervisor or department can also prove inspirational. Some academics leave university after an undergraduate or Masters degree, only to return to complete a PhD after a period of work, while others might complete all of their degrees in quick succession. After a PhD, for example, academics might choose to concentrate above all on teaching, and follow the route of teaching fellowships, or they might continue with the research path and apply for postdoctoral positions. On the whole, though, academics will seek to obtain a position as a lecturer, from which they might be able to progress to a position of senior lecturer and beyond, gaining promotions as they develop their research and continue to publish articles and books. Here are a few examples of potential academic career paths to demonstrate how each of the different degree levels support one another.

Career path 1: Humanities academic

Career path 2: Physical Sciences academic

Stage 1

Four-year undergraduate degree with Masters component (MSc in Physics)

Stage 2

PhD in Physics

Stage 3

Postdoctoral research fellowship in Physics

Stage 5

Senior Lecturer in Physics

Stage 4

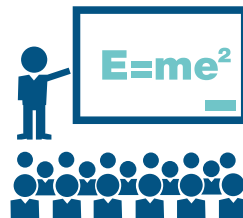
Lecturer in Physics

Stage 6

Senior Lecturer & Reader in Physics

Stage 7

Professor of Physics



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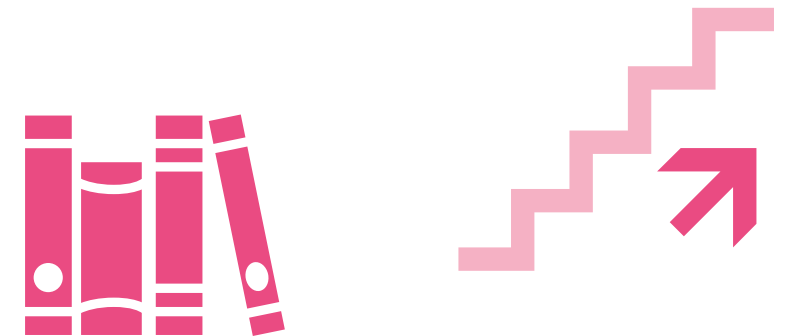
What is life like as an academic?

In the same way that there is no 'typical' career path for academics, there is likewise no 'typical' life for an academic. However, for many of those who obtain an academic post, professional life revolves around three central strands, which also represent important skills: research, teaching and administration.

Research is often what leads to a life in academia in the first place, with one or more themes or topics stimulating the interest of a student and prompting them to develop this interest in their postgraduate study. Research is also the lifeblood of academia, encouraging debate and discussion, and in many cases feeding into the teaching experienced by undergraduates.

In the same way, teaching can enable academics to refine their ideas and research and to address important questions.

Finally, administration is a vital part of academic life, without which universities would not be able to function and students would not be able to attend classes. As with any profession, academia can be a stressful and highly-pressured environment, but for the vast majority of academics there is also much to love about working in the higher education sector, not least the opportunity to conduct research into a topic they love, while, in many cases, also benefiting from the chance to impart this passion to their students. The conditions of employment for academics vary according to their role: some might work exclusively on their research, while others develop their teaching interests. Nevertheless, most academics will be obliged to conduct some form of administration, and, on the whole, most will be passionate about the pursuit and dissemination of new ideas.



Making the transition from undergraduate student to academic

It's a big leap from the experience of an undergraduate student to the pressures and demands of an academic. Fortunately, postgraduate work enables you to gain exposure to the sorts of challenges that you might face during your future academic career. Postgraduate studies require much more self-motivation and time management than undergraduate degrees, while also developing other skills including organisation and communication, all vital to a career in academia. Yet the transition between undergraduate and postgraduate level can be challenging. However, with some careful planning these transitions can also be highly advantageous and can enable you to gain the necessary skills and experience to take up an academic post after your postgraduate work. Here are some of the benefits, and challenges, to making the transition between undergraduate degree level and life as a postgraduate:

Benefits

More autonomy. This can also be a challenge to life as a postgraduate, but on the whole postgraduate students experience greater autonomy when deciding e.g. which modules to take or which areas to specialise in. The PhD, especially for those in the Social Sciences and the Arts and Humanities, enables considerably greater autonomy than undergraduate study.

Closer relationships with academic staff. Whether undertaking a Masters or a PhD, postgraduates forge closer relations with their supervisors, and benefit from highly dedicated close support from an expert in the field. Supervisors combine the role of mentor with academic tutor, and a good working relationship with your supervisor can lead to a whole series of opportunities, including the chance to [teach or demonstrate](#) with them. In many cases, especially in collaborative working environments, postgraduates have the opportunity to engage with academic staff as colleagues, thus developing the collegial skills necessary to take on an academic post.

More resources. Postgraduates can benefit from access to greater resources, including books and journals, while also gaining access to specialist equipment in the Sciences. Postgraduates can also benefit from specialist skills training at most institutions.

Opportunity to study a theme or topic in more depth. Undertaking postgraduate work in any discipline will entail some close analysis of a subject: this in-depth examination enables you to go some way to becoming an expert in this field in your own right in a way which is simply not possible for the vast majority of undergraduate degrees. This experience can lead to the excellent analytical abilities required of all academics, and can lead to opportunities to publish your work, a vital requirement of most academic posts.



Challenges

Greater demands on time. Along with the core requirements of a postgraduate course, there are often many other tasks to undertake, which must be balanced with research or study. These can include teaching, especially for PhD students in the Arts and Social Sciences who benefit from studentships, pursuing skills development courses, and taking on some small administrative roles. It is simply not enough to undertake a postgraduate course and expect to obtain an academic job: rather, postgraduates are also increasingly expected to engage with event organisation, conference attendance, publishing and teaching. Such demands can have a detrimental impact on the quality of a postgraduate's work, so careful time management, in particular setting aside regular 'research days' can be a huge help in this regard.

Higher expectations. Fellow postgraduates and staff will expect a higher standard of work and greater intellectual engagement at postgraduate level, regardless of the subject or degree course. These expectations can be hard to manage at the start of postgraduate life, but clear communication with supervisors and staff can ensure that you are informed about the precise nature of the expectations of the course. Contacting the department's senior tutor or Director of Graduate Studies can also be a way of ensuring that you are well-informed about how to overcome any difficulties that you encounter when undertaking the course.

Financial pressures. Masters courses in particular, but in some cases even doctorate-level degrees, are not funded. When postgraduates are required to seek out their own funding, this can place further strain on time available to study or conduct research. As such, it's important to investigate the funding opportunities available before starting the course (including some of the options detailed later in this ebook) and to be very clear with staff about any financial concerns. Juggling a part-time job with studying, however, develops an ability to manage a large and varied workload, which will be welcomed by employers in every sector and in particular in academia, where you will be required to teach, undertake administration and to conduct research.

Planning your application for further study: first steps



Masters, and other postgraduate degrees, offer you a whole range of benefits, equipping you for a series of future roles, while also developing your wider skill-set. Studying a Masters, for example, can also help your chances of obtaining employment after graduation. A recent study by the Higher Education Statistics Agency found that 74% of Masters graduates in 2011-12 found a job, compared with 71% of those completing an undergraduate degree.

There are clearly many benefits to a Masters or PhD, but what should you consider when first thinking about postgraduate study? Here are ten top questions to be answered before you think in more detail about the finer points of the application process and help to determine your reasons for taking a postgraduate degree.

a Why do you want to undertake postgraduate study?

Is your motivation your future career? Is it purely academic? Is it about developing skills? What sort of theme, area or subject would you like to study? Think carefully about your motivations as they will shape what you look for in a Masters course or indeed in a PhD course.

b What sort of course would you like to follow?

If you would rather have more direction, then a taught Masters would be most appropriate, but if you would rather have more space to pursue your own research project then a 'by research' degree might be worth exploring.

c Where do you want to study?

For some students, continuing to study at their first university offers a brilliant opportunity to continue in a familiar environment; for others the choice of university is dependent on the availability of funding, the content of the course, or even the location. There could, for example, be particular expertise relating to your interests among the academic staff at an institution which would make it the perfect choice. Think carefully about the location and facilities of a university if you are planning on a more lab-based MSc or a taught MA.

d How will you fund the course? Is there funding on offer? Will you have to use savings or ask for help from family? Are there opportunities for finding part-time work?

Financial constraints are the most significant barriers to Masters study, so investigate the potential of funding at the earliest opportunity.

e How will you be supervised or taught? Will you be working in small groups or alone?

If you prefer working with others, then in the Arts and Humanities research-intensive Masters courses might be best avoided. By contrast, collaborative working is a common in the Sciences, giving you the opportunity to work with colleagues at different levels of their academic careers.

f Who will be teaching or supervising you? Will this teaching be undertaken by world-leading researchers?

These are the same questions that are asked by undergraduate applicants, but at postgraduate level the choice of teacher or supervisor can help to shape your future career path. It is very important to work with someone with whom you can establish a good working relationship as a Masters can sometimes lead to further opportunities, including PhD study, in the future.

g Will you be required to live locally to the institution?

At some universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge, there is a requirement to live within close proximity to the institution. Courses elsewhere might be teaching or research-intensive, obliging you to re-locate to the university in question. Think carefully about whether you will be required to move, as this is likely to increase the financial costs of undertaking a Masters or PhD.



h Is there a postgraduate community in your chosen department and university?

Some departments may welcome hundreds of Masters and PhD applicants but suffer from a lack of genuine postgraduate communities. Check the webpages of the department in question for details of postgraduate events and conferences, which tend to be a good sign of a lively postgraduate community. In the same way, your chosen university may not have any facilities dedicated to postgraduates; don't simply expect the students' union to organise special events.

i How will your Masters or PhD affect your personal life?

Undertaking postgraduate work at any level and at any time in life can be stressful and labour-intensive. What are the existing commitments in your personal life, and how will you be able to balance them with your Masters or PhD work? Anticipating these challenges before your application will enable you to better cope with changes in routine and availability when you begin your course.

j Who will offer you support?

Universities often have student support services responsible for the welfare of postgraduates, but when you are working away at your dissertation or labouring in the lab until the early hours of the morning, you will require someone closer to hand. Line up one or more close friends, your partner or members of your family to see you through the Masters or PhD process. In many cases, their support will offer a vital lifeline.



8

Identifying the skills needed to conduct postgraduate work and for an academic career

There are many skills involved in conducting postgraduate-level work, which will also be vital to a future academic career. Having established your motivations for undertaking postgraduate work, it's now time to examine how your existing skillset, developed from your undergraduate degree, from extra-curricular activities or in professional life, match some of the key skills at postgraduate level. The grid below is designed to help you to identify existing skills and areas to develop these in the future.

Skill
<p>How will this skill help at postgraduate level?</p> <p>How have you developed this skill in your undergraduate degree, in professional life or in extra-curricular activities?</p> <p>How can you develop this skill further?</p>
Communication
<p>Working with colleagues, supervisors, academic staff.</p> <p>Presenting research findings, organising and attending events and conferences.</p>
Organisation
<p>Planning study/research days; balancing research or study with other activities, including teaching and attending professional development courses; ensuring timely completion of studies</p>
Team work
<p>Working with colleagues and supervisors, especially in collaborative research projects (e.g. in the Sciences); when organising events or conferences; developing collegial ability in an academic setting</p>
Analytical abilities
<p>When conducting research or undertaking in-depth study of a subject; undertaking administrative roles (e.g. in fulfilment of the requirements of a studentship)</p>

9 Is it worth doing a Masters?

A bridge between undergraduate and research work

If you want to become an academic but are unsure about jumping straight from an undergraduate degree to a research programme then a taught Masters provides a natural way of progressing to postgraduate work. It provides you with the independent study skills and research skills required at postgraduate level but without leaving you working alone with little guidance. Taught Masters programmes allow you to attend classes with a cohort of other students, encouraging group learning and a collegiate atmosphere. While going immediately into a research Masters and a PhD might seem daunting, a taught Masters is a good option for many students.

Personal enthusiasm, love of studying and love of subject

Although the cost of doing a Masters is financially high, many students undertaking a taught Masters are doing so for enjoyment because they love the subject rather than for career development. Mature students who have retired from another career still comprise a considerable proportion of Masters students. However, this market is most vulnerable to fee rises and their numbers depend on the ability to provide a solution to postgraduate funding crisis. Regardless of your career intentions, these attributes of enthusiasm for studying and for subject are crucial for Masters students as without them you will struggle with postgraduate study.

[Adapted from the original article, 'Is doing a taught Masters still worth it?' by Catherine Armstrong](#)



10

Choosing a course: What's the difference between an MRes and an MA/MSc?

Master of Arts (MA) and Master of Science (MSc) degrees are largely taught courses and Master of Research (MRes), while containing some taught elements, focuses more on research skills. That's not to say that there aren't taught and research elements in both degrees. There are often taught elements in MRes courses and there is almost always a research project at the end of an MA/MSc. The emphasis is different however; in MRes courses, around two thirds of the course content consists of research project work – in taught Masters courses the research project will be nearer a third.

A good example of how the course structure of an MRes differs from an MSc is given by the University of Liverpool's School of Biological Sciences. Its new Post-Genomic Study programme is offered as either an MSc or MRes. A closer look at each programme structure shows that the first semester consists of the same choice of taught modules. In the second semester, however, the MSc course offers further taught modules while the MRes students either undertake the first of two research projects or a long research project which carries over into the third semester. MSc students don't start a research project until the third semester, while the MRes students will either be in the middle of their long research project, or beginning their second of the two research projects.

In both MA/MSc and MRes programmes, courses tend to be a year of full time study, or two years part time. Both are likely to end with a final research project or dissertation. The number of taught hours per week varies between courses and will often depend on the subject. There will also be a certain amount of research required in order to complete the final project or dissertation.

[Article adapted from the original 'Which Masters Degree - MRes or MA/MSc?' by Sara McDonnell](#)



11 The applications process

So you've thought about why you want to do a postgraduate course, or indeed another postgraduate degree. You've planned the type of course you want to study. You've lined up the perfect teacher or supervisor. The university has excellent facilities for postgraduates. So it's time to think about the applications process. Applying for a postgraduate course is, in many ways, like applying for a job. Universities are looking for applicants with genuine enthusiasm, and the application is the opportunity for you to promote yourself to the admissions tutor.

So what should you consider when tackling the applications process? Every institution has its own application form and will process admissions differently. The forms in question can often be painstakingly minute in their requirements, but it is worth persevering! At this point, it's also important to think about transforming your ideas into a genuine research project. The following five tips offer some advice and suggestions for navigating the postgraduate application process.

a

What are the university and department's expectations? What are the entry requirements?

It can be very informative to email the department's postgraduate admissions tutor for an informal conversation about the expectations of the course. If a department is hoping to recruit applicants with certain professional experience, for example, then it is helpful to know this before starting the applications process.

b

Will you be required to submit an additional application for funding? If so, what does this entail?

Again, contacting the postgraduate admissions tutor can provide you with advice and guidance on potential funding options: in some cases, departments offer their own postgraduate bursaries, while in others there is a central university fund. It's important to ask about the likelihood of obtaining any central university funding, as this can often be very competitive and can be divided amongst many departments.

c

Will you require a research proposal?

If so, plan this well in advance and take advice from friends, from previous lecturers and indeed from the postgraduate admissions tutor in the department. If you are only required to write a personal statement, it can be very beneficial to write about how you would employ your postgraduate experience in the future. Emphasising how this qualification could fit into your career trajectory can help your application to stand out from the crowd and shows that you have thought seriously about the long-term importance of your postgraduate degree. In any case, **enthusiasm**, some signs of **originality** in your approach and **realism** about the timescale for your project, especially with regards to the dissertation, will be welcome in research proposals and in personal statements.

d

Will you be required to pay a fee for submitting your application?

This is another financial factor to consider when applying for your postgraduate degree, and varies from institution to institution, so it's important to enquire about this well in advance of submitting the application.

e

Will the timing of your application affect the likelihood of funding?

At some institutions, the funding deadline is set in advance of the deadline for applications. Again, check with the postgraduate admissions tutor in the department about the relevant dates to ensure that you submit your application well in time for any internal funding deadlines.



12 Searching for funding for UK-based Masters courses

The financial demands of a Masters are generally those which represent the biggest barrier to undertaking postgraduate work. While banks offer Career Development Loans, these tend to charge high rates of interest which might make repayment difficult. While many research funds can be highly competitive, with very low success rates, there are, fortunately, many opportunities to secure funding at Masters level to provide the means with which to pursue your goals. Although it's important to have a back-up plan to your funding goals in this highly competitive environment, the following suggestions are designed to offer some suggestions for where to start searching for funding.

a Contact the postgraduate admissions tutor at the department in question. They are generally well-informed about funding opportunities and can provide some advice on departmental or institutional funding. They may also be aware of some more obscure sources of funding.

b Search university postgraduate admissions websites for details of institutional funding and pay careful attention to their requirements. Some scholarships may well only offer funding to international students, while others might apply exclusively to Home/EU students.

c Check the websites of the major research funding councils ([Leverhulme Trust](#); [Arts & Humanities Research Council](#); [Economic and Social Research Council](#); [Wellcome Trust](#)) for their distribution of Masters funding. Sometimes this funding comes with its own research allowance to cover the cost of books and other materials, which can prove very helpful.

d Investigate the websites of subject associations and societies for your subject area. While they may not offer any direct funding for Masters applicants, they often advertise funding opportunities.

e Sign up to the [jobs.ac.uk mailing list](#) for Masters courses and to the principal academic mailing list for your subject area. Funding opportunities are often announced via these networks, and generally at the same time as calls for Masters applications.

13 Searching for funding for Masters abroad

Studying for a Masters abroad provides you with the opportunity to gain experience of living in a different country while at the same time pursuing the same academic goals as a Masters in the UK. However, there are still costs associated with studying overseas. So how might you fund a Masters course abroad?

a Study in Europe

If you are an EU citizen wishing to study in another European country you are entitled to pay the same course fees as a national of that country. In many European countries tuition fees for postgraduate study are lower than in the UK and in some countries, such as Sweden, there are no tuition fees for EU citizens. However, you do have to factor in living costs and how they may differ to the UK and costs of trips to and from home.

b Funding sources

[Graduate Prospects Country Profiles](#) are a useful starting point for information; types of postgraduate study available are listed for each country along with costs and scholarship opportunities.

The Education and Training section of the [European Union website](#) has useful information including details of Erasmus Mundus, a scheme that provides scholarships for joint Masters and Doctorates involving study in more than one European country or in partnership with non-European higher education institutes.

You may also be interested to know 160 research grants are awarded annually by EU member states for UK students to study PhDs in Economics, History and Civilisation, Law and Political and Social Sciences, with a European perspective, at the [European University Institute in Italy](#).

It is also worth looking at [Research Councils UK European Funding](#) pages.



c Study outside Europe

If you choose to study outside Europe you must remember you will be classified as an international student and fees will be a lot higher than for a national. Sourcing scholarships or studentships may be essential to assist with funding.

d Funding sources

The [Leverhulme Trust](#) is a good starting point; it offers study abroad studentships for postgraduate and postdoctoral research and grants for international travel.

The Research Councils UK International Funding Opportunities pages will be of interest if you wish to spend a shorter time abroad. Schemes are available to support activities that foster international collaboration, through initiating or further developing relationships between researchers in the UK and another country.

[The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission](#) offer scholarships to study in Canada and Singapore* (with the possibility of NZ and India in the future) for PhD study and post-doctoral research fellowships.

[Studying-in-Australia.org](#) - Everything you need to know about Australia's Education System and Education New Zealand for information about New Zealand's Education system.

[The Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation](#) is a UK charity that offers scholarships for British graduates to study Japanese and do work placements in Japan.

*information correct at time of writing – Oct 2014

e Study in the USA

The [Fulbright Commission](#) offers a wealth of advice and information relating to postgraduate study in the US and funding support. Postgraduate Student Awards are available each year to help finance the first year of postgraduate or doctoral study in a range of subjects or to attend a US university as a 'special student researcher'. Scholars and Fellows Awards are available for academics and professionals to study/conduct research in the US. As you would imagine there is a competitive application and interview process.

f Assistantships

It is also possible to study in the US on an Assistantship. Assistantships are offered to those on research focused Masters degrees where funding is offered in return for services to a university, such as teaching, research, lab supervision or working in a campus office for about 15-20 hours per week. This is also a good way to get valuable work experience.

Adapted from the original article: [Funding Postgraduate Study Abroad](#) by Wendy Reed,

14 Writing your funding application

You've found a funding source to study the perfect postgraduate course at the perfect university. Now it's time to write the funding application. What should you include? What should you leave out? What are universities and departments looking for? Funding applications, like the initial application for a postgraduate place, can represent stressful experiences. However, with a little advice and patience funding applications can enable you to carry out the postgraduate course of your choice.

a Why this particular course?

This is a question that you will also need to consider when completing the initial postgraduate course application, except that here you will need to emphasise the benefits you will gain from undertaking the course, and what you intend to do in the future.

b How will your work make some wider contribution?

This might be a contribution to the department or university in question, or indeed to society. Masters courses, for example, do not require the same original contribution as PhD study, but it is still helpful to suggest how your study might benefit others as well as yourself.

c How will the course fit your existing skillset and education level?

What is it that you have done in your work life or in previous education that adequately prepares you for this particular degree, and demonstrates that you will thrive on the course?





d How will you make the most of this opportunity?

Will you engage in other scholarly or professional activities while a Masters or PhD student? Might this involve research in a particular lab or archive? Or even overseas? Emphasise how you will try to use this opportunity for your own professional development as well as the academic benefit.

e How will you work in your department?

Suggesting that you will attend departmental events and adopt a collegiate approach will always be welcome when applying for internal funding.

f Will you share your work with others?

Suggesting that you would be willing to talk about your experiences, your research, and your wider Masters, or PhD, work to others, perhaps in the form of Widening Participation activities, will provide evidence to potential funders of your willingness to engage with the professional demands of academia.

15 Case studies

This ebook has aimed to offer some advice, guidance and reassurance about the practicalities of undertaking a Masters degree. Like a job application, seeking out and applying for a Masters can be stressful and time-consuming, but the effort is rewarded with a brilliant opportunity to gain a further qualification, and indeed skills and experiences which you would not otherwise gain. It is, though, always helpful to get a range of experiences and viewpoints, so here are three case studies of recent Masters students and graduates, with their advice on applying for Masters and for funding, and their motivations for pursuing Masters study.

a Case study 1:

Nathalie Greenfield, MA in French Studies, University of Cambridge



'I chose to do a Masters because I didn't feel like I was "done" with education yet and wanted to continue to be stimulated through study. Many places abroad, particularly France, now require a Masters for jobs and so it will be useful in that respect. I chose the course because it was varied, offered a lot of freedom and was tailored to my interests. The applications process at Cambridge was hard work but worth the effort! I had to complete an initial application form, then had an interview, and then was obliged to conduct research into the different types of funds available for funding. However, this research proved worthwhile as I gained funding to cover the fees for the MA.'

b Case study 2:**James Southern, MA in Modern British History, University of Manchester**

'I self-funded my Masters through part-time work, following a very simply applications process which involved an online application form. I understand that many MA students are, as dictated by finance, required to fit a Masters into spare time around working. Putting this aside, however, my main advice would be to dedicate as much time as possible to the course, and really make an effort to immerse yourself completely in the reading and research.

I don't mean to sound like a draconian headteacher, but you really won't get the best from it if you take it casually, I don't think. It's a unique opportunity to really engage intensely with a subject, without any of the responsibility or commitment that comes at doctoral level. I undertook my MA to improve my job prospects and because I like history, but I got so interested and enjoyed the work so much that over the course of the 12 months I gradually decided it was what I wanted to do with my life. I don't think I'd have made that decision had I not taken the time to do all the reading and really take the writing seriously. I'm now preparing to begin a funded PhD in September (not at Manchester), so I can say without much exaggeration that it changed the course of my career and life.'

c Case study 3:**Jareth Flood, Msc Environmental and Energy Engineering, University of Sheffield**

'I chose to do a Masters at the University of Sheffield, primarily because I felt I needed to enhance my job prospects. There were other Universities and courses I could have chosen but I knew a lot of friends who had gone to Sheffield, who had never said a bad word about the place. I didn't really have enough time to apply for funding as I applied quite late. I only knew of one student who received funding, which was given by his employer. If I could only give one piece of advice it would be to try and befriend or at least be comfortable with your lecturers, as they can always help with learning, PhD applications or just give friendly advice.'

**16** What is life like as an academic?**Postgraduate applications: action plan**

You have now read a range of advice and suggestions on applying for a postgraduate degree. While on the surface the applications process can seem stressful, with careful planning you will be well on your way to postgraduate study. To help you in your planning, it may be helpful to work through this summary of key action points before starting the all-important application.

What are your main motivations for undertaking a postgraduate degree?

Which type of course do you want to follow and at which institution?

Who will be teaching or supervising you?

Postgraduate applications: action plan

How much are the fees for the course and is there a possibility of internal funding?

Does the university charge for applications?

When is the application deadline and how does it relate to funding deadlines?

Are there funding opportunities beyond the institution?

What support is available for postgraduate students?

Is there an existing postgraduate community in the department/university?

What facilities are available to postgraduate students?



Postgraduate application SWOT analysis

It can be very helpful to critically appraise your application before submission, offering a final opportunity to ensure that this is the right postgraduate course and right institution for you. This SWOT analysis template is designed to help you to check that the application reflects your strengths, in particular through assuring the admissions tutor that your educational background and existing skillset match the entry requirements for the course. Fill in each of the quadrants of the SWOT grid before reviewing your application for the last time. It might be helpful to work through the grid and the application with a friend, colleague or lecturer to gain further feedback on your application.

Strengths	Opportunities
<p>How does the application emphasise the match between your skillset and educational background and the course requirements?</p> <p>How does the application underline the link between your future career trajectory and the postgraduate course?</p>	<p>Which institutions will value your strengths and current skillset or educational background?</p> <p>How can you make sure that you use your existing skills and interests to stand out from other applicants?</p>
Weaknesses	Threats
<p>What is a postgraduate admissions tutor most likely to perceive as a weakness to the application?</p> <p>Are there any parts of the application which play down your enthusiasm for the course?</p>	<p>What might other candidates be saying in their applications?</p> <p>What are the potential gaps in your educational background or skillset that might prove a barrier to acceptance onto the course?</p>

17 About the author



David Lees is Teaching Fellow in French at the University of Warwick, having previously taught at the universities of Bath and Newcastle. He undertook his Masters at the University of Warwick, for which he obtained a bursary to cover fees, and will shortly be submitting his PhD. He has written a series of articles on teaching for jobs.ac.uk, and is the former recipient of a Warwick Award for Teaching Excellence for PGR Students who teach.



18 Suggested reading

[A Practical Guide to Planning an Academic or Research Career](#)

[What Should I Do After My Masters Course?](#)

[A Guide to 5 Types of Research Degree](#)





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