Postgraduate study

Careers and Employability Service

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BE THE DIFFERENCE
Considering postgraduate study

Each year a significant number of Stirling University graduates go on to postgraduate study for varying reasons. It is important to be clear in your own mind why you want to take this path. Entry to some occupational areas requires a postgraduate qualification, e.g. teaching and social work. Most academic positions in higher education, and in the field of research, also require further study at a higher degree level. Other people will choose further study to increase their chances of entry to their chosen profession, e.g. journalism or marketing. It can also be a way of changing career direction, and taking a course unrelated to your first degree.

Some people are attracted to postgraduate study in order to give themselves more time to think about their future. However, if you are half-hearted, you may have difficulty in convincing course selectors of your commitment and in explaining your actions to potential employers. If you need time to consider your future, think about alternatives such as short term work or volunteering. Remember, future employers will want to know why you chose your postgraduate course and what you got out of it.

What qualifications are available?

Postgraduate certificates and diplomas (PgCert/Dip) - 9 months to 1 year, often combining a theoretical background with practical/vocational preparation for a particular career, such as teaching or librarianship. A relevant degree is not always a requirement, so this route offers scope to graduates wishing to change direction. However, some courses ask for relevant experience. On completion of a dissertation some diploma courses also award a Masters degree.

Taught higher degrees - Masters (MSc/MA/MPhil/MRes) - Most are full time taught courses, normally lasting one calendar year, although there are some part time and distance learning courses. A good honours degree (usually a minimum 2:1) is often required, sometimes in the same (or closely related) subject area. These courses usually consist of course work and a dissertation. Some courses build on first degree work (e.g. an MPhil in Modern poetry would require an undergraduate degree in English), while others are more vocational (e.g. MSc in Environmental management).

Higher degrees by research - Masters (MSc/MA/MPhil) and doctorates (PhD/DPhil) - These involve in-depth study of an academic subject, usually linked to your first degree subject. It normally takes 1-2 years for a masters, and 3 or more for a doctorate (PhD). Usually, a 2:1 or 1st honours degree is required for entry. Some PhDs may require that a Masters degree is completed first, but may allow work from the masters to be incorporated into the PhD, helping reduce the length of study.

Choosing Your Course of Study

Having decided on the most appropriate type of study you should consider:

- **Location and reputation**—Speak to your academic staff for advice
- **Be clear about your motivations** and consider carefully the type of course
- **The selection process** - Do you have the relevant skills, experience, type or level of degree required? What is the level of competition for entry?
- **Closing dates** - Some courses, e.g. teaching, social work and law, have fixed closing dates. Others do not set a fixed closing date but accept applications from early in the autumn semester. Timing
of applications is often determined by the timing of funding applications.

- **How to apply** - most applications are made directly to universities, often through their website. It is also worth checking whether the university you are interested in uses UCAS’ postgraduate application system, which some universities have signed up to. You can find out whether the institution you are interested in studying at uses UCAS by having a look at their website at ucas.com/?schemes=Postgraduate&theme=all_stages

- **Careers seminars/fairs** - Look out for open days at the institution or department you are interested in studying at. Also look out for Careers and Employability Service events regarding postgraduate study on our website stir.ac.uk/careers

**How will it be funded?**

It is often much easier to get a place on a programme than to secure funding. Very few courses automatically come with a guarantee of financial support. Contact the programme director to ascertain if there is funding available, and find out how previous students funded themselves. The main possibilities are:

**Public funding**— As with all postgraduate funding it is necessary to secure a place on a course before you can apply for funding. Competition is intense, with only a small percentage of candidates actually making successful funding applications. Research councils www.rcuk.ac.uk publish an approved list of courses, and many of their awards are allocated to these courses on a quota basis. Other public bodies provide limited funding for certain courses, including the Students’ Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), saas.gov.uk/full_time/pg/funding_available.htm, Local education authorities in England, Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI) and the European Social Fund (ESF).

**Institutional help**—There may be some institutional help available in the form of studentships, hardship funds, teaching, laboratory work or undergraduate student marking. Speak to the programme director for advice and information.

**Alternative sources of funding** -A number of charities, trusts and foundations may award partial funding for study. Details can be found at trustfunding.org.uk and charitychoice.co.uk

**Loans** – Eligible (Scottish domiciled and EU) full-time or part-time students who have accepted a postgraduate place on an eligible course can apply to the Students’ Awards Agency for Scotland for a loan to help pay all or part of their tuition fees. Full details on the SAAS website saas.gov.uk/index.htm.

Alternatively, some students borrow from family members or in many cases take out a Professional and Career Development Loan, which allows loans of up to £10,000. See gov.uk/career-development-loans/overview
What about Study abroad?

If you are interested in this, the importance of starting your preparations and investigations early cannot be stressed enough. Information can be harder to track down, closing dates vary significantly, many countries have quite different academic systems, there may be language-based or additional test requirements, competition may be higher, and, finally, it is important to be sure that the course you study overseas is acceptable to professional bodies in the UK. See our information sheet on ‘Study abroad’ and our website for more information.

Have a look at the Contacts and resources section for websites and publications.

Career guidance: If you would like to discuss postgraduate study, funding or applications, you can either book a 15 minute appointment through our website stir.ac.uk/careers or book a 45 minute appointment through the student hub in Room 2A1.

Timetable for applying for postgraduate study

Your penultimate year

October- March

Check out

- prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate_study.htm
- postgrad.com/
- stir.ac.uk/careers/students/furtherstudy/
- potential course options in UK
- eligibility requirements including finding out whether you need to gain relevant work experience
- possible funding
- any deadlines for applications
- opportunities for postgraduate study abroad

April - September

Clarify

- specific details of any opening and closing dates for applications
- school tutors’ attitudes to your proposed plan for postgraduate study and any suggestions they have for relevant areas of study and/or institutions
- initial thoughts concerning any research proposal involved
- level of support available from any course/study admissions tutors
- nature of support from your referees - critical to your success
- How you will research individual courses
- how you will fund your study

September onwards

- Apply for postgraduate courses with early closing dates, including teacher training, social work and law in the UK, and some postgraduate courses for the US (see www.fulbright.co.uk/ for more detail)
• Pick up a free copy of the ‘Prospects postgraduate funding guide’ and check out prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/funding-postgraduate-study
• Attend open days at the institutions/departments you are interested in
• Confirm your referees.

Your Final Year

October – December

To find postgraduate courses/research on offer refer to
• Prospects postgraduate directories
• prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate_study.htm
• findamasters.com (for taught masters)
• masterscompare.com
• findaphd.com and www.jobs.ac.uk (for research degrees)
• ucas.com (for social work, teaching and law)
• postgraduatestudentships.co.uk/ (for all postgraduate study)
• individual university websites

Pick up first issue of ‘Prospects postgrad’ magazine

Obtain detailed information about
• structure and assessment methods of courses/study programmes
• application procedures
• relevant sources of funding and application procedures

Consider
• content of any dissertation proposal
• content of applications, whether by application form, personal statement or CV

Submit applications and prepare for early interviews

January – March

Continue to
• attend interviews
• investigate sources of funding

April – July

Check
• early funding body deadlines
• degree performance requirements
Check ‘Prospects postgrad’ magazine and the national press for

- research/teaching assistant posts
- courses with places unfilled
- new study programmes or those attracting new funding
- late funding body deadlines

Make late approaches to departments of interest

Making applications: personal statements

Perhaps one of the trickiest issues when applying for postgraduate study in the UK is writing a personal statement. The personal statement is essentially a marketing tool for you — be imaginative and make yourself stand out.

No matter the structure of your personal statement, you will want to ensure it addresses the following:

- your academic background and its relevance to the course
- your work experience and its relevance and benefit
- your reasons for selecting the course
- any extracurricular activities and what you have gained from your involvement
- how the course will contribute to your career aims and goals
- demonstrate your commitment, enthusiasm and passion for the course/subject
- your reasons for wanting to study at that particular institution

As with any career move, it is essential that you think carefully about what you want to achieve by undertaking the course. We would recommend that you do your research and take time to discuss your options with a careers consultant.

The personal statement is one of the main mechanisms for providing evidence to postgraduate course providers that a course is right for you and that you have the potential to achieve the learning outcomes required. Usually there are prompts to give you an indication of what issues you need to address. For example, the University of Stirling postgraduate application form guidance suggests that:

‘a personal statement will normally include why you wish to study at the University of Stirling, and why you wish to study your chosen programme/research topic and will mention any relevant background study/experience you may have.’

In most cases you are given 1 page of A4 to make your case which equates to between 300 and 500 words, although this will vary by university. Not all postgraduate course providers will give you prompts so it is worth looking for those that do so for similar courses to help you identify the key issues that need to be discussed.
Style and tone

If your statement is fresh, lively, well-written and researched, you'll be setting yourself apart from other applicants. Read your statement very carefully - poor spelling and grammar detracts from the content so use a spell and grammar checker. Be concise, clear and logical, explain with as much clarity as needed to make your point. Stay within prescribed word limits, don’t be tempted to make the text small, and don’t make them struggle to read. Pay attention to presentation. Be positive and enthusiastic – selectors will read many personal statements and you want yours to stand out.

Structure it with an introduction, a main body and an end. The middle section might detail your interest, career goals and experience in your particular field, as well as your knowledge of the field. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the kind of language that professionals would use in conveying this information.

Generating content ideas

Why do you want to do the course? Look to convey your enthusiasm and motivation for the course. Write about any projects and dissertations or work you have done if they are relevant or demonstrate relevant skills. Mention any prizes you have won, and also travel or study abroad along with relevant work experience. Describe anything that shows motivation, creativity, dependability or independence.

- **Why this institution?** Are there specific reasons why you want to do research or study here, does it have a high rating, have you talked to former students? Are there specific academics or research being carried out there?
- **What personal skills can you offer?** Remember that work experience, hobbies, volunteering and any activities are potentially important sources of evidence. Demonstrate that you’ve done your research about the course/institution and that you've seriously considered your strengths and areas for development for postgraduate study. If you have had vacation jobs, what skills have you developed e.g. team working, communication and working under pressure? Have you had to overcome any obstacles or hardships in your life? This may show evidence of determination/resilience.
- **What are your career goals?** You may not have a very clear focus on what you want to do afterwards, but you should have some ideas. A clear direction will strengthen your commitment to do well in your studies and selectors will know this. Ideally, your desire to become a teacher, nurse, or whatever should be the result of specific experience in your statement.

Information on writing personal statements that you may find useful:

- Graduate prospects: Getting a teaching job: personal statement at: [prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_teacher_training.htm](http://prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_teacher_training.htm)
- Writing the personal statement (Purdue University) at bit.ly/90pUw8
- **Get it checked by an a careers consultant**—check [stir.ac.uk/careers/students/advice/](http://stir.ac.uk/careers/students/advice/) to find out the times when a careers consultant is available and to book.
Remember you will be asked about your personal statement at interview.
Get it checked. It won’t take long and it may make a big difference!

Postgraduate study interviews

Getting called for an interview gives you a chance to see the department and university, meet potential tutors, and, if you can, current students. The style of interview varies greatly between courses and institutions, and there may also be group tasks involved on the day.

Preparation for the interview

- Look over your application/CV to familiarise yourself with what you wrote. You can be sure the interviewers will pick out points from your application/CV for further discussion and clarification.
- Think about the course/department and read through any information you have so you are well informed at the interview and can also prepare any questions you have yourself about the course.
- Learn about your research topic (especially PhD students), you will be expected to have some level of knowledge at the interview.
- Find out about the research interests of the academic staff in the department by looking at their web pages

“...the key is to get candidates thinking, and to ask questions about the research they are likely to do. We invite them to prepare a statement beforehand......... In the interview itself, aside from the obvious things like 'Why do you want to do this course?' and 'Why Stirling?' the main line of discussion is to probe on matters arising from the prepared statement. ........ many candidates seem surprised by this, though I’m not sure why. There doesn’t seem a lot of point asking them to submit a statement if we are then going to ignore it. But many candidates bring some routine patter with them, and get a bit disorientated when they don’t get the chance to use it, or are challenged about it.”

Interviewer for the MPhil, PhD and DN/DM programmes at Stirling.

What will interviewers be concentrating on during the interview?

Why you want to study

They will want to know your reasons for taking further study. This will help give them an idea of your motivation and also your commitment to the course. Think through your reasons for wanting to do further study before you go to an interview. For example, do you want to:

- Develop your existing subject knowledge from your first degree?
- Stand out by developing some new skills and enhance your employment prospects?
- Convert/change to a new career area?
- Have a complete change of career direction into a new subject area?
- Develop some new skills and enhance your employment prospects?
- Enter a profession, e.g. teaching or social work, for which a postgraduate course is essential?
Why do you want to study here?

Be prepared to explain what attracts you to that specific course and that specific institution, for example, the research strengths, the structure of the course or the facilities available.

Your commitment to the area of study

They will want to know that you are serious about undertaking further study and that you have researched the course or area of study/research that you are interested in, as well as the department and institution. You might also be asked questions about your undergraduate study, such as ‘which part of your degree did you enjoy the most?’ You need to show enthusiasm in your answer and try to link your current course to the one you are now applying for.

Your potential to succeed

They will also want to identify your potential for academic and, where applicable, practical work in order to assess how well you will cope with the requirements of the course/research. Before the interview think about the kind of skills that will be relevant to go on to undertake further study and how you have achieved them. You may need to give examples of both academic and transferable skills and be able to explain where you gained them and how they will be of benefit on the course. You may want to include examples of:

- research skills
- written/verbal communication and IT skills
- ability to work on your own without supervision
- problem solving skills
- analytical skills
- work experience
- self-motivation

Your interviewers may also be interested in your understanding of what is involved in postgraduate study, resulting in questions such as ‘what do you feel are the main differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study?’ You need to be able to show that you understand the level of critical thinking, independent study, time management and self-discipline involved in studying at that level.

You might also be asked how the course you have applied for fits in with your career plans so be ready to outline how the course will help you achieve your goals for the future.

Finally, be prepared for questions like ‘how do you intend to fund your course of study?’ and make sure that you have investigated relevant sources of funding. You might need to explain how you would fund studies personally if you are not successful in grant applications.

On the day

- Take the opportunity to look around the department and meet potential tutors.
- You may also want to use this day to look round the campus and the town itself to get a feel for
the place and whether you would enjoy studying there.

- Be aware that some supervisors are very passionate about their subject and therefore expect you to have a keen level of commitment both to the subject and academia.
- Be ready to answer or discuss very subject specific topics (do your preparation!)
- Be enthusiastic and smile!

**Example interview questions**

1. How do you think a Masters degree differs from an undergraduate degree?
2. How would you deal with course stress e.g. deadlines, amount of work?
3. Why did you choose to study XXXX at university?
4. What is the greatest challenge you are looking forward to on the course?
5. What aspects of your degree did you enjoy/not enjoy?
6. Why did you apply for this course?
7. Why did you apply to study here?
8. What do you know about the course structure?
9. Define your area of study to ‘the person in the street?’
10. What are your particular areas of interest?
11. What relevant experience do you have?
12. What would you say are your main strengths? Areas for development?
13. How do you manage your time/get things done?
14. How do you intend to fund your study?
15. What will you do if you are unsuccessful in securing funding for the course?
16. Why do you think we should offer you a place on the course?

**PhD applicants may also be asked the following:**

1. What attracts you to this research?
2. What do you think about the research we have done here?
3. Why do you want to do a PhD?
4. What led you to choose this research topic?
5. What will you do if you fail to secure a PhD topic in the current round?
6. Have you considered any career directions other than research?
Your questions to the interviewer

1. As usual at interview you should also think about questions you would like to ask.
2. Examples could include:
3. What have previous students gone on to do?
4. What are the tutorial/supervisory arrangements?
5. Who has sponsored previous students?
6. Is it possible to take on extra activities such as seminars, invigilating etc?
7. What do you regard as the key issues in the future development of XXXX?

Contacts and resources

Don’t hesitate to contact us to discuss your postgraduate study options, get feedback on an application or practice your interview skills!

- Career guidance/feedback on applications: You can book a 15 minute appointment to speak to a careers consultant during our quick queries times—check stir.ac.uk/careers to find out when a careers consultant for your faculty is available.
- Practice interview: Trying out your interview technique and practicing how you would like to answer those tricky questions can be invaluable preparation. The Careers and Employability Service provides one-to-one practice interviews and group sessions on interview technique. Call in to the Student Services Hub or telephone (01786) 466 022 to book a practice interview or visit stir.ac.uk/careers to find out when our next seminar is on.

Web Resources: Here is a selection of useful websites:

- stir.ac.uk/careers/students/jobsearch/
- stir.ac.uk/careers/students/furtherstudy
- prospects.ac.uk: searchable database of courses and general advice with a postgraduate study section under the ‘Study’ tab
- ucas.com: for Teacher training applications
- findaphd.com and www.jobs.ac.uk: For researching PhDs and research MScs
- findamasters.com: for researching taught Masters programmes
Contact information

Careers and Employability Service

Got an enquiry? Visit the Student Services Hub

Telephone: 01786 466022

Email: careers@stir.ac.uk

stir.ac.uk/careers

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