

## Choosing your postgraduate programme

The United Kingdom (UK) offers a wide range of taught postgraduate programmes or postgraduate research programmes which are respected and recognised throughout the world. Every year thousands of international students come to the UK to enhance their careers and their knowledge. Whatever your subject, you will be able to further your academic qualifications in an environment that attracts some of the best intellects to study at some of the best institutions in the world.

### **Checklist: Why study a taught postgraduate course or postgraduate research course in the United Kingdom?**

- Most UK Masters programmes can be completed in one calendar year, making a top postgraduate qualification more affordable.
- Tight controls are kept on the quality of education and standard of degrees.
- Many subjects are available at all postgraduate levels – diploma, Masters and doctorate and you can choose the type of institution at which you would like to study.
- If you complete a diploma or Masters course, you will be in a good position to go on to do a doctorate.
- Many university departments have strong links to business and industry, making research directly relevant to the world of work.
- The opportunity to improve your fluency in English will improve your job prospects and help both you and your employer develop international links.
- UK qualifications are internationally recognised and there is a tradition of welcoming postgraduate students from around the world. At postgraduate level, students from outside the UK form over 25% of the student body.



## 1 What do I need to think about?

There are currently over 18,000 postgraduate opportunities to choose from. There are a vast range of courses and you need to think about which will best suit your needs. To help do this you must first determine what your existing qualifications and experience enable you to do. And secondly you should decide where your ambition lies. Think about your answers to the following questions:

- Is a postgraduate course necessary for the field of work/career that you have chosen?
- If career advancement is the reason for doing a postgraduate degree, can you find out from professional bodies in your own country which qualification you should aim for?
- Would a postgraduate qualification enhance your job prospects in your chosen field or might employers be more interested in the skills that you have picked up during work experience?
- Do you need to do a particular postgraduate qualification to convert to the career area which you are interested in?
- Do you need to do an initial postgraduate course (such as a Masters) as preparation for later doctoral study?

## 2 What can I study?

*In the UK, 'postgraduate' refers to the level of higher education following a first degree such as the BA. There are many types of postgraduate programmes but they all usually require you to have completed a first degree (or the equivalent in your own country.)*

Many postgraduate courses now contain both taught and research elements. However there is a traditional division between the two styles of delivery and you will often find qualifications split into either 'taught' or 'research' programmes.

### Taught courses

Some taught courses are designed to deepen your knowledge of your undergraduate subject, others are 'conversion' courses that will introduce you to a new subject and bring you up to speed quickly. Taught courses usually consist of a number of modules which are assessed by a mixture of continuous assessment and exams. There will be a set amount of contact time with staff through seminars, tutorials, lectures and one to one contact. Taught courses generally result in the award of Diplomas, Certificates and certain Masters degrees. The final assessment for a Masters degree is often based on the submission of a dissertation, usually of between 10,000 - 20,000 words.

### Research courses

Research courses involve the in-depth study of a specific field, usually related to your first-degree subject. The results are presented as a written report known as a thesis or dissertation. This forms the subject of an oral examination usually conducted by two specialists in your field of research. Most research degrees involve working closely with one or more experienced researchers who supervise your study. To be successful you will need to demonstrate intellectual independence and, as you have to set and keep to your own schedule, time-management skills and self-discipline. Research courses generally result in the award of Masters Degrees and Doctorates.

The following table gives an overview of common postgraduate programmes.




## Postgraduate qualifications

Qualification	Entry	Duration	Delivery/ Assessment	Comments
<b>Certificates and Diplomas</b>				
<b>Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip), Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in various subjects</b>	Usually a first degree in a relevant subject	9 months (if full time)	Taught, some have project work.  Usually continuous assessment but can include exams.	Both types of award are common for conversion courses. Certificate courses tend to be shorter and at a lower level. Can sometimes be converted to a Masters by project work or dissertation.
<b>Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or PGDE (Scotland)</b>	First degree in subject that you will teach.	One year full time, two years part-time.	Taught  Assignments and practical teaching.	This the common route to teach in state secondary schools in the UK. There are also some courses for primary teaching.
<b>Masters Degrees</b>				
<b>Master of Arts (MA); Master of Science (MSc)</b>	First degree (honours level, 2:2 or above)	One year full-time, two years part-time.	Taught or Research  Exams plus dissertation or thesis, sometimes coursework and oral exam.	Might include some training in research methods.  International students may be asked to do a PG Dip first as entry can be very competitive.
<b>Masters in Research (MRes)</b>	First degree (honours level 2:1 or above)	Two years full time.	Taught  Assessment by thesis	Relatively new qualification designed to prepare students for doctoral research.
<b>Master of Business Administration (MBA); Master of Laws (LLM); Master of Dental Surgery (MDS)</b>			Taught	These are widely recognised specialised Masters courses.  <i>For further information on MBAs see our information sheet in this series.</i>
<b>Master of Philosophy (MPhil)</b>	First degree (honours level 2:1 or above)	Two to three years full-time, four to five years part-time.	Mixture of taught and research or purely research.  Thesis plus oral exam.	This Masters is at a higher level than the MA/MSc as it involves a longer research thesis (around 40,000 words). Many institutions provide for transfer from an MPhil (or other Masters by research) to a PhD for suitable candidates.



Qualification	Entry	Duration	Delivery/ Assessment	Comments
<b>Doctorates</b>				
<b>Doctor of Philosophy (PhD; DPhil)</b>	First degree (2:1 or above) in a relevant subject or more usually a Masters degree.  Sometimes by transfer from a Masters course.	Three to four years full-time. Five to six years part-time.	Research  Thesis plus oral exam.	
<b>New Route PhD (in vocational subjects such as engineering)</b>	First degree (2:1 or above) in a relevant subject or more usually a Masters degree.  Sometimes by transfer from a Masters course.	Three to four years full-time.	Both taught and research modules.  Taught subject specific courses, study and research skills training and interdisciplinary modules to enhance professional skills.  Continuous assessment, exams and thesis.	Similar in structure to a taught Masters.  Currently available in 34 institutions.  For more information see the <a href="http://www.newroutephd.ac.uk">www.newroutephd.ac.uk</a> site.
<b>Professional/ Taught Doctorates (DEng; DMus; DEd; DBA; DClinPsych)</b>	First degree (2:1 or above) in a relevant subject or more usually a Masters degree.  Generally, three years appropriate professional experience.	Three to four years full-time. Five to six years part-time.	Both taught and research modules.  Field of study is that of a professional discipline, rather than academic enquiry and scholarship.	Fastest growing type of doctoral study  Students are professional practitioners usually investigating their own practice or organisation.  Thesis should be original research relevant to students' own professional area.
<b>PhD by Practice (PhD; DMus; AMusD etc)</b>			Research	Most common in the fine and creative arts.  Thesis to include analysis of a creative process, project or performance.
<b>PhD by Publication</b>			Research  Thesis and oral exam.	Candidate's thesis can consist of published work and a 5,000-10,000 word critical appraisal of the published work.  Not a common route to the PhD in the UK, usually taken by academic staff.

Note: **Integrated Masters programmes (MEng; MSci; MMath)** In the [UK](#), many universities now offer a four year [undergraduate](#) programme in [science](#) courses, with a project in the final year. These degrees reflect a higher level of achievement than the traditional [bachelor's degree](#) and often satisfy the requirements of the relevant professional body.



## Where can I search for a postgraduate course?

The three main web resources for finding out about postgraduate programmes and doing course searches are:

Education UK; [www.educationuk.org](http://www.educationuk.org)

Prospects Graduate Careers website; [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

Hobsons Postgrad website; [www.postgrad.hobsons.com](http://www.postgrad.hobsons.com)

## Can I progress from a Diploma or Certificate to a Masters?

Yes. Some courses offer this specifically. They will be listed in course directories as MSc/Diploma or MA/Diploma.

### 3 Choosing the right course

There are many postgraduate programmes available and it can be difficult to choose the one that is right for you.

There are three main areas that you need to think about when you are comparing programmes, these are:

1. **Academic quality**
2. **Personal factors**
3. **Resources and support**

#### 1. Choosing your course: Academic quality

The power to award degrees is regulated by law. It is illegal for an institution to offer to award a UK degree without proper authorisation. To see which universities and colleges offer courses leading to recognised UK degrees go to [www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/)

#### What guarantees are there on the quality of degrees and teaching?

The **Quality Assurance Agency** (QAA) is responsible for regulating standards and quality for UK higher education. It produces a Code of Practice which provides the institutions with guidelines on how they should manage academic standards and quality.

As well as setting standard guidelines the QAA also carries out inspections of institutions to see if they are reaching these targets. These QAA inspections are called 'Institutional Audits' and the reports are published on their website at [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/)

During summer 2005 a National Student Survey was carried out which asked all recent graduates to give their feedback on the institution they attended and the programmes they followed. This information will be useful when choosing between courses and institutions so check the new **Teaching Quality Information** website at [www.tqi.ac.uk](http://www.tqi.ac.uk)



### ***Is the quality of postgraduate research assessed?***

Yes. In addition to QAA audits and reviews, the **Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)** evaluates the quality of research in universities and colleges. Its main purpose is to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality.

The RAE is conducted every 4-5 years and uses a process of 'peer review' where academics review the quality of work of their fellow researchers. The last exercise was in 2001 and the next one will be held in 2008.

The results of the RAE are given on a departmental basis, from 1 (the lowest) to 5\* (the highest) according to level of excellence. The RAE assesses the quality of research and not the quality of teaching but postgraduate research students may find it useful to look at the ratings for their subject across institutions.

Note that current ratings are from 2001 and may not now be an accurate reflection of research quality so prospective students should not base their decision solely on the RAE.

For further information see the links below:

- The 2001 RAE ratings ([www.hero.ac.uk/rae](http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae) )
- A league table of 2001 RAE ratings (<http://ukeas.com.tw/rankings.htm> )
- Information about the next RAE in 2008 ([www.rae.ac.uk](http://www.rae.ac.uk) )

### ***Is there an official list that ranks UK universities?***

No. There are no official performance tables for UK universities or higher education institutions.

However, in recent years there has been increasing consumer demand for lists that do rank institutions and a number of UK newspapers produce these lists annually. These unofficial rankings include:

- Sunday Times Good University Guide ([www.timesonline.co.uk/section/0,,716,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/section/0,,716,00.html) )
- The Independent ([http://education.independent.co.uk/higher/az\\_degrees/](http://education.independent.co.uk/higher/az_degrees/) )
- The Guardian (<http://education.guardian.co.uk/universityguide2005> )

These league tables are often a source of controversy with debate about how the lists are compiled and which factors are being assessed. If you do want to use these rankings make sure that you read the introductory sections which explain where they have drawn the data from and use them as 'general guide' only- do not base your final decision only on how the institution is ranked.



### ***What other quality issues should I think about?***

- If you are looking for a research based postgraduate course you should find out as much as possible about your future supervisor. Find about the research they are conducting themselves, where their work has been published, if they are widely respected in your field of interest and if they have an international profile.
- If you are looking for a taught programme you should ask about the size of classes.
- Find out about the employment record of postgraduates from the institution. These 'graduate destination' statistics should be available from the institution or may be posted on the [www.tqi.ac.uk](http://www.tqi.ac.uk) site. You may also want to contact potential employers to check how they would value the qualification.

## **2. Choosing your course: Personal factors**

- Think about the advantages of different types of location. Is there a location where you have friends or family connections? Would you prefer a big city experience or a smaller town? Are you interested in available transport connections or opportunities for tourism/cultural activities?
- Do you want to live on campus? Is this possible at the institution? If you are looking for a research based postgraduate course you should find out as much as possible about your future supervisor. Find about the research they are conducting themselves, where their work has been published, if they are widely respected in your field of interest and if they have an international profile.
- Course tuition fees will vary from place to place but some institutions may offer funding or financial assistance.
- Availability of courses and academic entry requirements.

## **3. Choosing your course: Resources and support**

- What is the range and number of other postgraduate students? Is there a graduate school that provides a central administrative point for graduates?
- What sort of English language support services will be available to you?
- Find out about the institution facilities. For example, is the library well-stocked, is there internet access and adequate computing facilities? Perhaps it is important for there to be a separate working space for research students?
- Have you identified a supportive supervisor for your research based programme? It is important that you have a comfortable working relationship so if possible arrange to meet with them before accepting a place and arrange to talk to their current research students. Also, find out whether you would be working alone or as part of a research group.



## 4 Entrance

### ***What qualifications will I need?***

Entrance requirements for postgraduate programmes vary greatly, so we suggest that you check with the specific institutions you would like to attend. If you are not sure where you want to go, you can obtain prospectuses from different institutions or find the information on their websites. As a rough guide, for a taught programme you will usually need:

- An outstanding academic record, with proven academic achievement.
- Usually, a first degree in the same subject as the postgraduate degree you intend to take.

For a research programme you will need:

- An outstanding academic record, with proven academic achievement.
- Usually, a first degree in the same subject as the postgraduate degree you intend to take.
- Generally, a Masters degree (a taught Masters), an MPhil (Master of Philosophy) or MRes (Master of Research)
- Evidence that you know something about research procedures.
- Some experience of working alone on a research project is very useful.
- Evidence of good writing and communication skills, especially with humanities and social science doctorates.

### ***Will my non-UK qualifications meet course entrance requirements?***

The National Academic Recognition Centre (NARIC) [www.naric.org.uk](http://www.naric.org.uk) is the official source of information on the comparability of international qualifications with those in the UK. UK NARIC supports universities and colleges but the final decision on the recognition of international qualifications is always made by the individual institution.

Check with your local British Council office whether they can give you some advice and then contact your chosen institution directly for specific information.

### ***Are there any English language requirements?***


Yes. Ensure that you have the English language ability required by the institutions you intend to apply to. For a postgraduate course an IELTS score of 6.0 to 7.0 may be required. Ask your local British Council office where and when you can take the test.

### ***How do I apply?***

There is no centralised admissions system for postgraduate courses in the UK so you should apply directly to the institution. Each institution will have different application procedures so you need to check with them directly.

It is important to allow yourself lots of time when applying for a course as it may take some time for the institution to process the application and get back to you with a decision.

What goes into the application will vary but you will be expected to highlight your academic record and possibly mention your proposed research interests. Work experience is valuable when applying for postgraduate courses so think about skills you have developed whilst working. Your personal statement will be a key part of the application so think carefully about your motivation and relevant experience for your chosen programme.



## 5 Next steps

### Checklist: Your next steps

- 1 Draw up a shortlist of institutions and courses. There is no restriction on the number of institutions to which you can apply but student advisors recommend a shortlist of 6-8 institutions.
- 2 Apply direct to the institutions either on their paper forms or online through [www.educationuk.org](http://www.educationuk.org) . Remember to check with the departments to see if there is a closing date for your application.
- 3 Give yourself plenty of time to consider your options by starting your application procedures at least one year before the course starts. You may want to apply to more than one institution as you may not get a place on your preferred course.
- 4 If you are applying for a scholarship, apply at least one year before the course starts. Remember that it is virtually impossible to arrange financial support once you have left your own country. You should arrange this before you leave and will need to provide evidence for UK immigration authorities that you can cover the costs of your study time in the UK.

## 6 What else do I need to know?

You should bear in mind immigration requirements when considering whether to study in the UK. Requirements vary according to your nationality or citizenship and the length of time you want to study. You will not be allowed to extend your permission to stay in the UK for more than two years on courses that are below degree level and are of less than one year's duration. The UKCOSA website will give you further information on this topic – [www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/guidenote.htm](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/guidenote.htm)

Note in particular that you will not be given permission to enter the UK as a student if the school, college or university that you want to study at does not appear on the UK Department for Education and Skills Register of Education and Training Providers. You can check the register by clicking on 'Browse the Register' at [www.dfes.gov.uk/providersregister/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/providersregister/)

For practical advice on living in the UK download *Studying and living in the UK* from [www.educationuk.org/bc\\_img/body/articles/pdfs/stud\\_live\\_uk.pdf](http://www.educationuk.org/bc_img/body/articles/pdfs/stud_live_uk.pdf)

## 7 Where can I find more information?

### British Council Education information

Website [www.educationuk.org](http://www.educationuk.org)  
[www.educationuk.org/scotland](http://www.educationuk.org/scotland)

For further information, you can find details of your nearest office at [www.britishcouncil.org/home-contact-worldwide.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/home-contact-worldwide.htm) which includes links to all our country web pages and a worldwide address book giving contact details for all offices.

### New Route PhDs

Website [www.newroutephd.ac.uk](http://www.newroutephd.ac.uk)

### Postgrad: The directory of graduate studies

Website [www.postgrad.hobsons.com](http://www.postgrad.hobsons.com)

### Prospects: Postgraduate directory

Website [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

### UK Grad Programme

Website [www.grad.ac.uk](http://www.grad.ac.uk)

### Higher Education and Research Opportunities

Website [www.hero.ac.uk](http://www.hero.ac.uk)



**National Academic Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC)**

Oriel House  
Oriel Road  
Cheltenham  
Gloucestershire GL50 1XP  
Telephone +44 (0) 870 990 4088  
Fax +44 (0) 1242 288 611  
Email [info@naric.org.uk](mailto:info@naric.org.uk)  
Website [www.naric.org.uk](http://www.naric.org.uk)

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Email [secretary@britac.ac.uk](mailto:secretary@britac.ac.uk)  
Website [www.britac.ac.uk](http://www.britac.ac.uk)

**Research Councils UK**

Website [www.rcuk.ac.uk](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk)

**Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)**

Polaris House  
North Star Avenue  
Swindon SN2 1UH

**Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)**

Whitefriars  
Lewins Mead  
Bristol BS1 2AE

Fax +44 (0) 179 341 1504  
Website [www.nerc.ac.uk](http://www.nerc.ac.uk)

**Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC)**

Polaris House  
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Swindon SN2 1SZ

Telephone +44 (0) 179 344 2000  
Fax +44 (0) 179 344 2125  
Website [www.pparc.ac.uk](http://www.pparc.ac.uk)  
Telephone +44 (0) 1793 413 200  
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Website [www.bbsrc.ac.uk](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk)

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Website [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

**Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)**

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**Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)**

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Telephone +44 (0) 179 344 4000  
Website [www.epsrc.ac.uk](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk)

**Medical Research Council (MRC)**

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Telephone +44 (0) 207 636 5422  
Fax +44 (0) 207 636 6179  
Website [www.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.mrc.ac.uk)

**National Environment Research Council (NERC)**

Polaris House  
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