Postgrad courses

Fulfil your potential with a higher-level degree

Plus: Abbey Krause on how an MSc in mediation added insight to her role
A continued rise in postgraduate study

Postgraduate study
A continued rise

The postgraduate degree has never been more popular and studying for a master’s is an increasingly well-liked way of boosting your knowledge and career prospects: in 2015-16 more than 500,000 postgrads started studying at higher education institutions. In this special supplement, we look at the added value of a postgraduate degree, be that full-time, part-time or online.

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A postgrad to suit every taste

Online courses and part-time study give a degree of flexibility to fit in with students’ lifestyles, says Gavan Naden

ull-time, part-time, online, or a mix of all three – the variety of postgraduate study options can be bewildering. This wide choice, however, does give scope to suit prospective students’ differing circumstances and lifestyles.

While traditional campus-based courses remain the most popular, there is an increasing interest in online study, with its flexibility and easy access. Edinburgh University’s head of submissions, Iain Sutherland, says that online courses are proving particularly attractive to those students who may have family and work commitments.

As with most universities, he says, advice is available on Edinburgh’s website: “We have a postgraduate recruitment team to help and run postgraduate open days, along with online sessions to give people an overview of what the courses involve.”

While my friends went out, I stayed in. But it’s made a huge difference to my life and career

Manchester University’s head of distance learning operations, Ian Hutt, says that online postgraduate courses take between two and a half to five years to complete. “Each module runs over 10 weeks and we like people to commit about 15 hours a week to study. We have study advisers to help people schedule their time.”

And if a course dovetails with what they’ve done before, he says, “it can work well – especially as many come with experience and renewed vigour from previous learning”.

Matt Broadway-Horner preferred the campus option and, after searching for a full-time postgraduate course that would accredit him as a psychotherapist, enrolled at Goldsmiths, University of London. “The full-time course required one full day per week of teaching and supervision in a class, plus one clinical morning. It made my week rather tight, but that kept me focused on getting the assignments done on time."

“It’s proved very beneficial as Broadway-Horner recently returned to Goldsmiths in a teaching and scholarly position, and has authored books and research on the LGBT experience, particularly sexual and mental health, and the ageing process.

Alternatively, part-time study in class, while demanding, allows students to keep working while they study. Mother of two girls, Jan Noble, opted for this route, so she could maintain her job, but also enjoy interaction with other students.

“I was in my mid-40s and working as a nurse manager in a hospice. I went into King’s College London to do a part-time master’s in advanced nursing practice in palliative care,” she says. “I was very privileged, as funding was arranged by my employer. However, if I left within two years after completion, I would have had to pay a percentage back.

“It was quite an effort – while my friends were going out, I stayed in and studied for three years. But it’s made a huge difference to my life and career.”

For working parents, online courses can be the only way to study as a postgraduate

Why study online?

● Online courses provide opportunities to learn and engage with people from different backgrounds and experiences.
● You can study anywhere in the world, provided you have access to the internet and a computer.
● Consider testing the waters beforehand by doing a free Mooc (massive open online course). Providers include Coursera, and FutureLearn.
● Online postgraduate degrees should provide the same standard of teaching as a “campus” degree.
● Use the Sconul scheme that grants access to a range of institutional libraries.
● If you have a family, or are working, self-discipline is essential, so set easy, manageable goals.
● Keep notes, otherwise you’ll find yourself continually returning to the online platform.
● Many courses can be extended over several years if students require extra time to complete the postgraduate course.
● Consider asking your employer to finance the course, as it may well benefit them as well as you. GN
The art of negotiation and dispute resolution is sorely needed in an age of strife, be it domestic or international, says Lucy Jolin.

"When students start, they often think that their job is to act persuasively to help one party see what the other is thinking. But that’s not the job of the mediator. That’s a kind of advocacy. I think the mediator is often helping each side to see their own position more clearly, and to think through what they might do in the situation." She adds, "The role of the third person is crucial. It’s an ideal place to hone these skills."

Source: The Guardian

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### Conflict is everywhere in our lives

An MSc in mediation helped to give depth to Abbey Krause’s work, improving her knowledge of the theory behind conflict resolution. The course has proved invaluable, she tells Lucy Jolin.

"Conflict is in our communities, our families and our workplaces... it is everywhere in our lives," says Abbey Krause, mediator at the Cyrenians, a charity supporting vulnerable and homeless people. And it can have a real impact on people’s health and wellbeing. When I came upon the practice of mediation, which helps people to manage conflict, I knew I wanted to do it."

Krause studied social anthropology and social policy at Edinburgh University, graduating in 2009. When she left, she volunteered for the Cyrenians and took a course with the Scottish Community Mediation Centre. "I was hooked," she says. She spent the next three and a half years working at East Lothian Community Mediation service as a community mediator, mediating between neighbours in dispute about everything from barking dogs to too-high hedges. In 2013, she began Strathclyde University’s MSc in mediation and conflict resolution, which she self-funded and studied part-time. "I wanted something that would give me more depth to my practice and knowledge in mediation and conflict resolution. We covered a whole range of conflict or dispute areas. One thing that really stood out for me was looking at the dynamics of conflict – the stuff around why people behave the way they do."

"Linking the theory with the practice was also very beneficial. I have an understanding of the skills that we use in the process. But what made the course really interesting for me was being able to think about why we do what we do as mediators, why we use certain skills and tools, and why we practise certain interventions." Krause’s current work at the Cyrenians involves working with families – the chief cause of homelessness in Scotland, she says, is relationship breakdown. "We help them to think about what is difficult in their relationships and lives, and find solutions and agreements that are going to suit everyone."

She’s also designing and delivering training for the Cyrenians Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution, and guest lecturing at Queen Margaret University. "Again, it’s the emphasis on this is what we do – and this is why we do it, in this particular way. The MSc really helped me with that."

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### Three’s company for rebuilding peace

The role of the third person in a dispute situation is to listen and observe without bias. This is crucial in mediating conflict, as it allows parties to hear each other’s perspectives without the mediator’s own biases influencing the conversation.

"The role of the third person is to help parties see things from a different perspective, to help them understand why the other party is feeling the way they do, and to facilitate open communication." - Joanne Atkinson

Negotiation is an essential process in all human relationships, from the workplace to global affairs. Getting the right skills and tools to manage conflict is crucial for both personal and professional success.
**Never too old for new tricks**

Going back to university to study may seem daunting, but the rewards are worth it, says Gavan Naden.

Although the prospect of returning to education after being laid off, single mum, Jeni Smyth, 36, invested in her future by using her redundancy money to return to education. She took a full-time psychology course, and intends to go on to do a master’s. “When I first arrived at Manchester University I wanted the full student experience, and being older means I’m a lot more focused on academia and less likely to go partying,” she says.

Although mature students studying at university are over the age of 30, some in their 50s and 60s. Many have mortgages, families and are in full-time employment. Although the prospect of returning to education, essay writing and mixing with younger students can seem daunting, having a few extra years on your peers can be a distinct advantage.

Emma Rose, 22, is a mature student from London. “There’s a lot of part-time, I have a young son and he’s ill, it’s a case of should I stay at home or should my wife, who works three days a week?”

She believes, however, that the course will change his life and career. “I have a lot more seriously than I would have done 10 years ago,” he says.

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Having a few extra years on your peers can be a distinct advantage. Admittedly it’s hard work, and you have to get the books out at all hours, but it’s been a fantastic experience.”

Smyth recommends seeking out support and advice on university websites. Manchester also arranges meetings with staff members during its adults returning to education sessions.

Sarah Glozer, 34, returned to education twice. The first time she completed a master’s after working for a consultancy firm, and more recently completed a PhD at Nottingham University in corporate social responsibility. “I worked for four and half years for Cadbury, before returning for the PhD programme,” she says. “They were both full-time courses, which allowed me to be fully immersed in the role.”

Her advice? “Getting back into academic writing doesn’t take too long. Just play to your strengths and focus on your areas of interest.”

Returning to university as a mature student can give your career a new lease of life.

**Getting a taste of what’s to come**

Attending an open day, on campus or online, is the best way to ensure the right fit, says Lucy Join.

Pen days have long been the traditional way for undergraduates to decide where and what they want to study. Now, more universities are offering open days to prospective postgrads, too.

A good open day will take into account the different needs of postgraduate students. “The most crucial element, says James Hadfield, director of postgraduate marketing at Nottingham Trent University, “is detailed course content. Prospective students will have a desire to understand how the course is going to enhance their existing knowledge and, therefore, their career.”

“Although there are no fixed entry requirements, it’s important to research the different subjects and the entry requirements for each one,” he says.

“Details regarding scholarship schemes or alumni discount opportunities are also important, as the availability of funding streams can determine if study is a viable option.”

At Warwick Business School, postgraduate open days are “more intimate, in comparison to the undergraduate events”, says Magda Brown, assistant business development and recruitment manager. “We offer a personalised approach and an opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with members of staff.”

Try before you buy: open days are invaluable when it comes to deciding where to study.

**Open days**

The last part of the day is an informal Q&A session in small groups, so everyone gets a chance to have their questions answered.

Some institutions now offer open days online. For example, the London Institute of Banking & Finance hosts live webinars. (Its MSc in banking and finance is delivered entirely online.)

“Prospective students can ask about the course, as well as watch a ‘taster’ lecture,” says associate dean Emma Tan. “It makes sense to have the open day online, as that’s the environment in which the students are going to learn.”

As postgraduate students are more likely to be working or have caring responsibilities, an open day is the perfect way to find out how the university may help. Student support should be the first point of call.

“Ask about welfare provision, childcare and the process if ‘x’ happens,” says Sin Duffin, student support team leader at Arden University, “especially when it may be an issue for you.”

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The Blue Planet effect

Thanks in part to the BBC wildlife series, there has been a sea change in the popularity of marine biology courses and the study of the world's oceans. Helena Pozniak tests the water

When she was just 12 years old, an impressionable Cathy Lucas, now associate professor in marine biology at the University of Southampton, met Sir David Attenborough. He'd come to talk to students about his 1979 landmark wildlife series Life on Earth. “I thrust him my copy of his book to sign. He inspired me to go on and study zoology.’’

Just back from a research trip to Saudi Arabia, she's since spent years investigating what makes jellyfish tick – programme makers at the BBC's latest natural history series Blue Planet II sought her expertise for a segment. Although jellyfish have been around for at least 500m years, they've remained the poor relation of marine life, often misrepresented as freakish, alien blobs, says Lucas.

But recent population blooms have piqued scientists' interest. “Attention is focused on what's driving this growth in numbers - and the effect this has on the oceans.” Invited to a screening of the Blue Planet II series, she once again heard Attenborough speak and thought: “Here I am, doing this, as my actual job.”

Lucas teaches students on Southampton's marine biology degrees based at the National Oceanography Centre. Like many universities around the country, Southampton is noticing the “Blue Planet effect” on the numbers of students interested in the field. “Big series such as these are critical in raising awareness of the issues facing marine wildlife,” says Lucas.

Even between the first and second series, there have been dramatic changes in the oceans, says David Duffy, a research fellow at Bangor University. “Most of these changes can be traced back to human activity, which is having a devastating impact.”

Duffy is working with scientists at the Sea Turtle hospital in the University of Florida, investigating the huge rise in cases of young turtles suffering cancerous tumours. “Numbers worldwide are skyrocketing and this is almost certainly due to human activity, but we don’t know exactly what activity,” he says.

Drawing on techniques he developed during five years spent researching human cancers, Duffy has been analysing samples from the turtles operated on: “I became convinced that the cutting-edge techniques I was using could be applied more broadly, so I embarked upon a project that brought me back to wildlife and the sea - having studied marine snails as a postgrad.”

From acidification of the oceans to the aggression of hermit crabs, there's no shortage of research avenues, says Prof Mark Briffa who's taught students at Plymouth University's one-year master of research (MRes) in marine biology. As professor of animal behaviour in the School of Biological and Marine Sciences, he's currently researching how and why sea anemones fight.

“We're still seeing students coming through who were inspired by the first Blue Planet series,” he says.

Plymouth accepts about 20 students on the year-long course, which kicks off with some taught modules to build research skills. Students then pursue individual research projects, working with university researchers or those based at the nearby Marine Biological Association. They may investigate local shores, go offshore or travel to a research facility in Ischia, Italy.

“The degree gives you a chance to dip your toe into research and see if it’s for you,” says Briffa. Students go on to find work with marine agencies and environmental consultancies, he says.

Briffa hopes the students also leave inspired with a sense of wonder and curiosity: “I can go to a local rocky shore and pick up a single rock and find some major divisions of life - that can't fail to fascinate anyone.

“It sparks questions of why animals live where they do and how they survived. There's a whole world down there that people simply aren't aware of.”

Dive in Where to study

Plymouth University offers an MRes (master of research) in marine biology - students can follow research projects with academics from the university or the Marine Biological Association, which co-hosts the course. Marine biology is offered at postgraduate level at Bangor University, while the University of Essex offers an MSc in tropical marine biology. The University of Stirling offers a master's in marine biotechnology, and Portsmouth offers an MSc in applied aquatic biology. Postgraduates at the University of Southampton can study marine biology based at the National Oceanography Centre, which owns two research vessels for carrying out boat-based fieldwork.