

# A degree beyond

**Laura Crane** on all you ever wanted to know about applying for postgraduate study but were afraid to ask

There are almost as many forms of postgraduate study as there are people studying them: research and applied; master's and doctoral level; full-time and part-time; fully funded, partially funded and self-funded. What are the common issues for people considering any of these routes?

## What course should I do?

Many careers – in clinical, educational and occupational psychology, for instance – require completion of an approved postgraduate course. It is important to check whether the course you are

applying for is accredited by the Society before applying. You must decide whether you want (or need!) to apply for a master's or doctoral level qualification. A master's course is typically a one- or two- year taught course, whereas doctoral qualifications usually require an independent programme of research for at least three years.

This choice is often determined by what you want to do with your postgraduate training: for instance, you can become a chartered occupational psychologist by completing a master's course, whereas you need to complete a doctoral level qualification to become a clinical psychologist.

Alternatively, you may simply want to get extra training to broaden your knowledge base – some master's courses are invaluable for acquiring the research skills needed to complete a doctoral course. Some universities offer a master's in research degree. Completing a master's course may also give you an indication of whether or not this is the right area for you before committing yourself to a three-year doctorate.

## When should I apply?

Postgraduate study does not generally involve applying through a single organisation like UCAS. Instead, it usually involves applying directly to the institution where you want to

study. There's no single deadline, so make sure you check at each institution to get your application in on time. The key message is, it's never too early to start thinking about the issues!

## How do I apply for a postgraduate course?

How you apply differs depending on the course you want to apply for. Clinical and educational psychology courses, for example, involve applying through a central body that distributes your application to the universities you want to apply to. Research courses, on the other hand, typically involve applying directly to each institution, and each university will have their own application form. Contact each university directly to find out more details about their application procedures and deadlines.

## Which institution is for me?

Choosing a place to study is very important, especially for doctoral courses, as you will be there for at least three years. Although the decision about where to study may be determined by personal factors (uprooting your entire family halfway across the country being a good example), there are several crucial objective matters to consider when deciding where to study:

- | Do the academic staff have good knowledge of your subject area? Get in touch with the staff members you would like to supervise your research to see if they are willing to take you on and to discuss your ideas before applying for the course.
- | What facilities are on offer to postgraduate students: shared or personal computers; printing and photocopying facilities; funding for

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 Central Scotland Brain Injury Rehabilitation Centre – Assistant Psychologist  
 Moving Minds Management & Rehabilitation – Psychological Case Manager  
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For more information, see p.1052. To book, e-mail [Kirsty Wright](mailto:Kirsty.Wright@psychapp.org.uk) on [psychapp@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychapp@bps.org.uk) or call +44 116 252 9550.

- conference attendance?
- I What training courses are on offer to postgraduate students? Grant writing and conference presentations, for example, are increasingly important.
- I Are teaching opportunities available to postgraduates? Teaching work looks great on your CV and can provide you with some extra cash too!
- I What funding opportunities are available? Do you get your fees paid? Do you receive a maintenance grant? Do you get money towards research expenses or conference attendance?

### How can I fund my study?

Unfortunately, student loans don't cover postgraduate study, so you must look elsewhere for funding. Some applied courses – clinical and educational, for instance – are government-funded and you receive a fixed wage for being on the course. Research master's and doctoral courses, on the other hand, can be funded through a number of different sources, such as research councils (ESRC, MRC, BBSRC, Wellcome Trust) and departmental studentships. Industry-funded studentships are also increasingly common. Note that the deadlines for these funding sources can be very early (some are over a year before the course start date!), so it's important not to leave it too late.

#### I Laura Crane

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## FEATURED JOB

**Job Title:** Forensic / Clinical Psychologist

**Employer:** South London and Maudsley Foundation Trust

**T**his job is based in the Forensic Intensive Psychological Treatment Services (FIPTS) community team.

John Blakesley comments: 'The job contributes to the Dangerous People With Severe Personality Disorders (DSPD) programme and is funded by the Department of Health and Ministry of Justice. It was originally based solely in high-secure hospital services and prisons. Our four-year-old project moves the programme into the community, inpatient and community residential settings for less risky individuals.'

Attitudes are crucial. 'We're working with patients who have committed serious violent and sexual crimes. We see our clients as people with problems, not primarily as ex-offenders. Nevertheless we seek a balance with risk reduction, which is why we've adopted a Canadian programme which measures risk dynamically and demonstrates genuine violence reduction. A number of us are ex-probation officers, so we understand this crucial balance. One of the main satisfactions is to see someone who represented a real danger to other people move safely into the community.'

John also sees this job as an ideal training ground for psychological clinicians. 'We work differently from most psychologists in this area. Each of us has a low case load. Almost all of our interventions are psychological. There's very little medication. We're an in-depth CBT practice though we use schema, DBT and acceptance and commitment therapies, for instance, and need to be aware of psychodynamic aspects of our work. This is a job for clinicians who want to learn their trade and are committed to clients. 10 per cent of the population have personality disorders, and it's an area where psychological intervention is increasingly needed.'

John is obviously proud of the team and its work. 'We're interdisciplinary and have a flat structure. The psychosocial approach of the team is crucial to our work. We occasionally have disappointments, of course, but there is excellent supervision, opportunities for genuine CPD and training in new techniques.'

The successful candidate will have experience in forensic or personality disorder work. 'It's crucial that they will want to build lives. In return we'll train them to face growing challenges reflected in, among other things, the 2007 Mental Health Act. And if this job isn't right for you, we're advertising another.'

You can find this job on p.1062, and with many others on [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk).

## The hitchhiker's guide to the thesis – Life, PhDs and everything

Four PhD students draw out some key aspects of the postgraduate experience

**B**eing a self-funded full-time PhD student is a tough, but potentially achievable, juggling act between sporadic work, studies and personal life. Time management of both semester and day is key for me. For example, when there's marking to be done at the end of a semester, the PhD takes a back seat; however, at the start of a semester, it's all about recruitment into my study. One of the bonuses of PhD study is this

flexibility. Sometimes I have to postpone supervisory meetings, or if I have been working during the week, I can catch up on my thesis at the weekend. In addition, combining study and employment gives me a breadth of experience and referees that will be helpful in securing a job post-PhD. Being able to apply for bursaries has been invaluable in affording conference and training opportunities. It's not all about work though, the support and

understanding of friends and family, even with some of them being 5000km away has been invaluable in keeping happy, healthy and ready to write.

Agnieszka Lech, 2nd-year part-time PhD student at Kent University

I am at the end of the first year of a PhD. It's fully funded, which covers fees, some research expenses and a maintenance allowance. This represents a significant cut from previous salary, and I have three young kids, but the funding means I can focus exclusively on my studies. I also do

some demonstrating and seminar hours at the university when available, which builds additional skills for my CV.

A typical day starts with some analyses, literature reviewing, and the write-up of preliminary findings, finished off with a trip to my supervisor for comments and advice. This year I have really focused on a comprehensive review of the literature, figuring out the gaps I could fill. I may also chat with my PhD colleagues, so we can learn from each other's research experiences and conclusions, learning further skills which will help us in the workplace. The flexible nature of the role means I can spend some quality time with the kids before a couple of extra hours on the thesis when they've gone to bed.

Paul De Cock is a full-time 1st-year PhD student at the University of Ulster

I work as a psychology IT technician and am coming to the end of a part-time PhD. My PhD paperwork covers the house and my job varies in intensity, so I am ready to cram in a couple of minutes work (with the support of my employer). A typical research day would see me up and ready by 9am at the latest, coffee in hand by ten past, and laptop on knee surrounded by

acres of paper moments later, working potentially until late into the evening. I dash through work deadlines, organising references, to searching for journals and information, and back again.

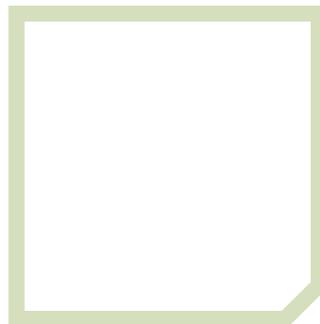
Evenings I structure around my family life, which consists of swimming coaching, Scouts, and all the usual household tasks, not to mention an occasional social event.

Consequently, it can be difficult to find any time to write. Aside from the obvious financial benefits in holding a permanent post, the benefit of carrying out my PhD part-time is the opportunity to do longitudinal research, and be a little more flexible with my own research questions.

Glenda Pennington is a full-time IT support officer and final-year part-time PhD student at Liverpool John Moores University

So what does a postgraduate do? From the statements above, it's (among other things) a combination of thesis-writing, teaching, marking, meeting supervisors, reading articles, collecting or analysing data, contacting participants, writing and submitting journal articles, attending training courses or conferences, applying for funding, contributing to departmental research or external committees, consultancy, networking, paid employment or voluntary activities. Emphases change from first to final year. At the start, students juggle priorities, and search for a routine. The middle period can vary widely, dependent on data collection

demands, while the final year is often a race against time to produce a quality thesis. No two days will be the same, and it is this flexibility and ability to get really involved with your topic, which is one of the great advantages of PhD life. Social support is also key. Everyone from supervisors to family members are stakeholders in your work. Befriending other PhD students and networking at events such as



## The graduate – are we giving employers what they want?

Siobhan Hugh-Jones (University of Leeds) investigates

Many undergraduate psychology programmes in the UK pride themselves on offering students extensive opportunities to develop and hone a range of skills, from ethical decision making and group negotiation, to using information-retrieval software and statistical packages. Psychology departments hope their graduates are equipped for at least baseline entry to the professional workplace. But what do the employers really think of the typical psychology graduate?

At the Institute of Psychological Sciences at Leeds University I have worked with Ed Sutherland, and Annabelle Cross from the University

Careers Service, to investigate these questions. Funded by the Psychology Network of the HEA, we interviewed a range of employers (e.g. NHS, Yorkshire Water, KPMG) about psychology graduates, and how universities might better prepare candidates for the workplace.

Interestingly, employers were reluctant to talk just about psychology graduates, as they felt there was no distinction between their skill base (either at the recruitment stage or in the workplace) and that of graduates from other comparable disciplines. This in itself perhaps points to missed opportunities, by both students and psychology programmes, to fully market the unique aspects

of psychology degrees. Overall though, employers were satisfied that psychology graduates came equipped with the right skills and attributes to be effective in the workplace, although employers identified four areas of dissatisfaction.

The first issue centred on self-marketing. While degree classifications were used as an initial screening tool, employers were keen for students in the recruitment process to draw upon a range of experiences to promote their own unique selling point. Employers placed tremendous emphasis on graduates ability to market themselves, quickly rejecting the 'good on paper' candidate who fails to impact at interview. It seems that equipping students with skills matters

little unless individuals know how to promote those skills, and themselves. Although HE careers centres do a fantastic job promoting student employability, the challenge for embedding employability skills and personal development planning (PDP) activities within undergraduate programmes is whether our remit should extend to developing the broader skills of self-marketing and personal impact among our students.

Second, employers stressed the importance of students being able to substantiate their application and interview statements with convincing evidence. Using competency-based interviewing (which is still very popular in selection procedures), employers are looking for evidence that the student can not only demonstrate key skills, but also reflect on past performance to enhance their future performance. Employers believe this gives them a more

'Postgraduates who Teach' workshops or PsyPAG conferences build both supportive relationships and create professional contacts for the future. Family life can be fitted around your learning, and having friends or relatives not doing a PhD can help you take a thorough break.

Funding is a key aspect of PhD life. Students have to think hard about the impact of funding on their PhD, and use available hours wisely. But paid, additional work doesn't just generate funds: it provides a range of specific, transferable skills that can help career prospects.

The PhD experience is not just about the individual student – it enables you to get your work into the wider psychological arena, contributing to the body of knowledge, and making a real difference to your field.

The final rush to complete may involve you abandoning most things in pursuit of finishing. You may become crazy, amotivated, and have writer's block or writer's cramp interchangeably. You stop thinking of days as consisting of hours, but as units in which you can perform statistical analyses. Instead of thinking about food, gin or personal

interaction, you will wonder whether you have included all the relevant articles in the field, or whether you have missed out the key one which makes a mockery of your work. You will get cranky if your supervisor doesn't pick up the phone before the third ring finishes, as this is perhaps a sign of having a life outside your PhD crises. You're also excited about finishing, but slightly unsure what you will do with all of those units of statistical analysis time free. You will start napping in your office, and your day is structured around caffeine administration and phoning the takeaway to deliver their delights to said office. You will have rambling incoherent thoughts, and have a tendency to start every sentence with 'consequently', 'however' or 'someone's name (year) found'. You have concerns that when you get to the viva, you will be exposed as a charlatan. Other than that, it's plain sailing till hopeful graduation and the whole experience is ultimately a great preparation for your career.

Gillian Smith is a research associate and a final-year PhD student at the University of Ulster

**I** Look out for more on postgraduate study in next month's issue

contribute

**We would like to hear from our readers about what areas of psychology you would like to see covered in these pages.**

**Articles and interviews can cover any topic related to careers in psychology. As with all parts of The Psychologist, we rely on your contributions and we can support and advise you through the process.**

**E-mail your suggestions to** [ian.florance@bps.org.uk](mailto:ian.florance@bps.org.uk).

**Also, the editor would like to hear your views on how [www.psychapp.co.uk](http://www.psychapp.co.uk) can be further developed for the benefit of advertisers and jobseekers. Is there anything not currently included in the site which you would like to see? For example, would you make use of a CV search function? Send your comments and suggestions to [jon.sutton@bps.org.uk](mailto:jon.sutton@bps.org.uk).**

reliable view of how the candidate will handle situations in the future, and therefore determine how they are likely to perform in the role to which they would be appointed. Students can prepare for these types of interviews by identifying instances where they demonstrated or developed a skill (e.g. 'I developed ethical decision-making skills in my undergraduate lab practicals') and practising communicating this to others. Thus, evidencing skills is crucial. As the NHS interviewee stated:

People who will rise to the top will be people who can give us evidence so rather than just saying 'I'm good at this, I'm good at that', you actually want the evidence.

Thus, although universities typically encourage students to record achievement, the process should perhaps now expand to facilitate reflection on that evidence and what it demonstrates.

Third, employers were interested in HE's efforts to promote employability through PDP, but were unsurprised at the difficulty of engaging staff and students in this practice. However, they stressed that development monitoring was an expected part of working life, seen as reflecting autonomy and drive, and that this expectation should be strongly conveyed to students:

The people who want to develop are the ones that are going to succeed and push further. We as a company expect individuals to be responsible for their personal development. It's not something that the company is going to do for them, they need to own it and also understand why the company wants them to own it (Corus).

"employers identified four areas of continuing dissatisfaction"

Fourth, there were a number of explicit barriers to employability that the employers identified, including the lack of evidence about the purported transferability of skills, the breadth of undergraduate psychology programmes working against an early focus on a particular career path, and finally a distinct lack of

professionalism in students.

This latter point seemed to be particularly irritating to employers, who reported that job

applicants frequently copied and pasted when completing application forms, often misnaming the target employer. Furthermore, they felt that the average student demonstrated poor written English in both applications and e-mail correspondence. Poor personal impact in interviews was also considered to be indicative of a lack of professionalism.

Thus, there seems to be a demand from employers to generate a more professional, employment-focused ethos in undergraduate psychology programmes, including a greater awareness of skills acquired, either from academic work or extracurricular activities, and of how these may render the individual distinct from other candidates. Equally important is the ability to articulate these skills to potential employers, and to offer convincing evidence of their use. Furthermore, there is a need to develop the professionalism of graduates through their interactions with peers and staff (hopefully seeing the last of 'kisses and hugs' on e-mails).

Further issues that warrant consideration by undergraduate psychology programmes include whether to incorporate some form of skill grading, and whether to involve employers in curriculum delivery to foreground employability from the outset.