your masters... what next?

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1 Introduction

WHO IS THIS FOR?

This information is for:
• students already studying on a Masters degree course;
• students interested in options after a Masters degree course.

It is primarily aimed at UK students but may also be of use to non-UK students, who should also consult the AGCAS information booklet Careers and Further Study for International Students, which contains specific information for overseas students wishing to study in the UK.

Postgraduate study is becoming an increasingly popular option. Over the past few years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of graduates from undergraduate degree programmes (in all subject areas but particularly humanities) opting for postgraduate study. In 2003/04, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey recorded that 13.8% of graduates opted for postgraduate study, of whom 6.3% chose to do a Masters level course.

Those of you in the early stages of planning for Masters level study should consult the AGCAS information booklet Postgraduate Study and Research for a useful summary of both taught and research Masters courses.

Most of you reading this booklet will have started your Masters course.
• You may already have some ideas about the type of career you would like to follow, particularly if you have opted for a more vocational course.
• You may have decided to take a purely academic course, perhaps furthering an interest in a subject begun at undergraduate degree level.

For those of you who may be interested in taking a further postgraduate course, chapter 2 ‘Further study’ will be useful. It guides you through the range of postgraduate courses available and offers advice on the benefits of opting for further study, how to fund a course and how and when to apply.

Chapter 3 ‘Career options’ is useful for both current and prospective Masters students as it covers the range of skills you can gain through study and how to maximise your career prospects by learning to market yourself effectively. There is also advice on how to generate careers ideas, including information on how to enter research and academic-orientated careers.

Whether or not you have a definite career in mind you will need to know how to identify employment opportunities. Chapter 4 ‘Employment’ considers what employers might be looking for and will help you to find sources of information on the local and regional labour market.

You may wish to think about alternative options; chapter 5 ‘Other options’ introduces self-employment, voluntary work and work experience.

Finally, chapter 6 ‘Down to you’ gets you to consider the whole process of managing your career by assessing whether or not you possess the relevant skills, knowledge and experience for your chosen career. It also covers how you might gain these and, ultimately, demonstrate your suitability for a job to a prospective employer.
2 Further study

The options available include:

- postgraduate vocational programmes/professional qualifications, eg PgCert (Postgraduate Certificate), PgDip (Postgraduate Diploma), MBA (Master of Business Administration);
- postgraduate Masters and Doctorate research programmes, eg MRes (Master of Research), MPhil (Master of Philosophy), PhD, DPhil (Doctor of Philosophy), DMus (Doctor of Music), AMusD (Doctor of Musical Arts);
- professional/vocational Doctorate programmes (professional Doctorates), eg EngD (Doctor of Engineering), EdD (Doctor of Education), DBA (Doctor of Business Administration), DClinPsych (Doctor of Clinical Psychology).

VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES/PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The PgCert and PgDip

- Those who are on less vocational Masters programmes, such as English or humanities, or semi-vocational programmes like the MEd (Master in Education), might be interested in investigating the PgCert and PgDip. Some of these lead on to a Masters, thereby giving you a dual qualification. However, these are qualifications in their own right and are sometimes validated by professional bodies and may give you more professional recognition in a specific field of employment.
- They are usually cheaper to fund (if you are unable to get any external funding), shorter than Masters programmes (nine rather than 12 months full time) and do not usually require you to complete a thesis or dissertation. They can also be regarded as the only way into some professions, for example, the PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) or the Scottish PGDE (Professional Graduate Diploma in Education) for entry into primary, secondary or further education, or one way into other professions, such as journalism (PgDip Journalism) and counselling (PgDip/Cert Counselling).

For further details about these types of courses, see the AGCAS information booklet Postgraduate Study and Research and the range of AGCAS Vocational Course Surveys (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/VCSC) available.

The MBA

These have been included in this section as they are a very distinctive type of taught postgraduate course, which many decide to do as an additional Masters level qualification. The MBA could be viewed as a way of entering a more business-focused career or enhancing your business knowledge and career prospects. Consult the MBA Casebook for information on the courses available.

- MBA courses are traditionally broad-based management qualifications. More recently, though, they are changing their focus from functional subjects, such as marketing and finance, to more specialist subject areas ranging from e-commerce to archaeology.
- There is a wide range of programmes available at over 100 universities in the UK alone. There are also many MBA programmes available overseas, in Europe and the USA, for example.
- You need an undergraduate degree or equivalent, which can be in any subject, with some courses requiring evidence of prior work experience. You also may have to sit the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) on application.
- MBA programmes are usually one year for full-time modes of study and two years part time. They can also be studied on a distance learning basis.
- Some are sponsored by employers and offered as joint higher education/employer programmes.
- Ten years ago, an MBA would have been regarded as a must in the business world in order to advance your career – this is now not the case.
- Realistically, you should have middle management experience before considering embarking on an MBA.

MASTERS AND DOCTORATE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

The MRes and MPhil

- Some MRes and MPhil programmes include a taught element, which commonly focuses on research methods.
- Some MPhils enable you to progress on to a PhD. Indeed, some PhD students are required to first complete an MPhil before embarking on a PhD as it is thought to be good training for the more in-depth research skills required for PhD level study (it is also a good test to see whether
you have enough original research material to turn your thesis into a PhD).

- The relatively new MRes is usually a two-year full-time course, or longer for part-time study, and also seen as good preparation for PhD study. Programmes tend to cover a specific subject area. The MRes is a stand-alone qualification, unlike the MPhil, which tends to be regarded as part of a PhD rather than as a qualification in its own right.
- The MRes can be used as a way into non-academic research for governmental bodies; an MPhil could be used as a route into academic research but would need to be marketed cleverly in order to avoid it being seen as a failed PhD.

**The PhD/DPhil**

There is a wide range of doctoral degrees available, which vary in content and subject area from university to university. They do, however, all possess some common features, notably the length of study: at least three years full time and usually a minimum of six years part time.

- For entry, you will need to possess one of the following: a first degree (at least 2:1), or equivalent, in a relevant subject; a relevant Masters degree, such as an MRes; or APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning). You will also need to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the subject area and your research proposal must be original and make a significant contribution to existing research material.
- Some PhDs now include a taught element in the form of research methods.
- Due to the cost of funding a PhD, most students commit to the full-time option (three years). Although some students receive bursaries, these tend to be quite poorly paid in comparison with ‘normal’ jobs.
- Some research studentships pay quite well, ranging from £12,000 to £16,000 per annum. As a research associate/assistant, on top of your own research, you would also be engaged in conducting research for an academic in the department, teaching and, in some instances (particularly for science disciplines), laboratory work. Research studentships are more common in science and technology areas. Typically, these are two-year posts but are often extended so a PhD can be completed.

**The new route PhD (four years: 1+3)**

PhD programmes have traditionally been almost totally research-based but more vocational taught programmes are being introduced through the new route PhD.

- The first students registered for programmes roughly two years ago. There are already over 120 available, primarily in science, engineering, technology, bioscience, social sciences, business studies and languages, but these are being extended to arts and humanities disciplines. Individual programmes can sometimes be negotiated, depending on a student’s particular needs.
- Essentially, it is the ‘old’ universities who are delivering these programmes.
- The first year of the programme leads to a Masters level qualification in its own right, with an MPhil being reached by the end of the second year. The remaining two years focus on research.
- Students develop a wide range of research and professional skills from a very comprehensive menu. There are three integrated strands: taught elements; professional skills; and research elements. As well as developing specific research knowledge, students get the opportunity to extend their group work, teamwork, time management, communication and IT skills. In contrast with other traditional three-year PhDs, new route programmes also incorporate career management skills.
- Entry requirements are the same as for a traditional PhD. Entry is possible with a 2:2 degree, though, as the programmes gain in popularity, students may find they are required to possess a 2:1. There is some funding available, which seems to be more readily available for those with higher degree classifications.
- This programme removes the need to do a Masters, although, from a recent survey, 70% of respondents already possessed a higher degree on entry.

See the New Route PhD website for more details.

**PROFESSIONAL/VOCATIONAL DOCTORATE PROGRAMMES**

Professional doctorate programmes with a substantial taught core can now be taken in some vocational areas, such as engineering (EngD) and business (DBA), and are known as professional Doctorates. They differ from PhDs and DPhils in that they involve study of a professional rather
than purely academic discipline. There are now over 200 of these courses in existence with more courses planned.

Consult the UK Council for Graduate Education’s reports on the range of doctoral degrees.

CHOOSING A COURSE

If you are currently doing a Masters course and trying to decide whether or not to opt for further study, you need to fully evaluate the pros and cons of doing this. This is particularly true if you have had to fund your Masters course. The average cost of a one-year Masters course is £3,010, with some MBA courses costing as much as £18,000. You will have had to find money for your daily living expenses too, which could cost, in an average year, around £7,000 in London and £5,800 elsewhere. These reasons alone may prevent you from contemplating any further study at this stage.

You will need to think about both personal and academic factors when considering further study beyond Masters level.

PERSONAL FACTORS

These may exert the greatest influence on your decision. Here are just some issues for you to consider:

- **Funding** - the PGCE is the only course that receives any mandatory funding. (Note, this does not apply to the PGDE course in Scotland.) The Student Loans Company doesn’t provide for postgraduates. The various research councils and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) – the biggest providers of funding – only award 10,000 studentships per year. Before committing to further study, approach departments directly to find out what funding is available and look out for salaried research assistant or associate jobs in departments. See chapter 3 ‘Career options’ for further details about where to look for research posts in academia. In reality, most students use a mixture of means to fund further study: savings; wages from part-time or full-time work; loans; and small grants from charities. Consult the Prospects Postgraduate Funding Guide for more detailed information on the different types of funding available and practical advice on alternative ways of funding your course.

- **Location** - you may find it easier and financially more viable to remain where you are, as you may have accommodation and a good network of friends. However, your course might only be available at one institution and you need to decide just how flexible you can be in terms of where you study. If you are a mature student with a family, you will have additional concerns. Can you feasibly relocate to where the course is? Would your family be able to move with you? Are there good schools and accommodation nearby?

- **Mode of study** - studying part time or by distance learning can make a course easier to finance, particularly if combined with part-time work. You may even get some funding from your employer. However, you will need to consider the practicalities of juggling study with work, particularly if you also have family commitments. Some students find part-time and distance learning courses harder; they may not be as well structured as full-time modes of study.

- **Benefits** - if the cost of your Masters programme has been high, you need to consider what the benefits of further study might be. There is evidence to suggest that having a higher-level qualification can earn you an enhanced salary: male postgraduates have been recorded as earning 20%, and females 34%, higher salaries than their undergraduate counterparts. Postgraduates are often valued by employers for their maturity, highly developed research skills, higher levels of intelligence and, moreover, commitment to further study. It takes more than just academic ability to get through another course, for example, a PhD – you need a tremendous amount of staying power and personal stamina.

- **Timing** - consider if this is the right time to do another course. Some people benefit from undertaking further study only when their career is well-established and use it as way of progressing, perhaps by obtaining a management position or other promotion within the organisation (this is very much the case for MBA students). In addition, you may need to

'My advice is: only do it if you really think it will enhance your career prospects and have the money planned well in advance. Try not to take out loans if at all possible; if taking out loans, be very careful about the payment rules.' (Masters student using a combination of self-funding and a career development loan)
gain some relevant experience before you are accepted on another course (the PGCE, or PGDE, at primary level requires a significant amount of prior relevant experience, as do many other postgraduate vocational courses).

**ACADEMIC FACTORS**

For research courses:
- Look into the reputation of the academic department. All departments in higher education institutions have been given a research rating, which indicates the quality of its research and publications. The results are published on the Research Assessment Exercise website.
- Look at the quality of supervision provided. A good supervisor should offer practical guidance on research methods, be able to motivate and encourage you and be available to arrange regular reviews of your work. As a research student, you will work alone for much of your time so you also need to consider how well you will cope with being isolated from your peer group.
- Try to make contact with any existing research students to gain an insider’s view of the department and institution.

For vocational/professional courses:
- Try to find out about the quality of the teaching on the course by looking at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) assessments of many higher education institutions. This is especially true for MBA programmes – you should choose your course carefully and research the ranking of courses as there is a definite hierarchy (a top 100).
- Have a look at the teaching structure of the course – it could be offered through lectures or a mix of both seminars and lectures. What would you prefer?
- How many students are on the course? Too many could mean you don’t get enough individual attention.
- If your main reason for selecting the course is to enhance your employment prospects, find out about the destinations of former graduates by approaching the department or your university careers service. What Do Postgraduates Do? (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/WDPD) gives a useful overview of the destinations of Masters level graduates by broad subject groups. AGCAS Vocational Course Surveys (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/VCSC) also offer destination information for some vocational postgraduate courses.

**MAKING APPLICATIONS**

For most courses, except the PGCE/PGDE, there is no central applications system and you should apply direct to institutions. Admissions tutors look for evidence of commitment to your subject and academic ability. For vocational courses, relevant experience and skills, and evidence of motivation for a particular career are important. Research programmes require you to submit a research proposal. It is advisable to apply early in the autumn term, 12 months before you intend to begin the course, when you have a maximum choice of courses available to you and access to any available funding. Interviews generally occur during the spring and summer terms.

In summary, postgraduate study is growing and changing constantly; the boundaries between vocational and research courses are narrowing; modes of delivery are becoming more accessible; and the range of courses is expanding. All these factors mean you will need to research very carefully how flexible you can be and to what extent further study will enhance your career prospects in the long term.
3 Career options

The career options available to you with a Masters qualification will vary depending on many factors, including:

- **the subject** you are studying - according to a recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey, there were clear differences between subject areas in terms of first destinations six months after graduating (although, overall, management was by far the most popular area of work entered by all Masters graduates). For example, arts and humanities had the highest numbers going on to further study; the 58% who entered employment did so in a wide variety of areas (eg education, media, PR and management). For the social sciences, just over 72% entered employment in social, business and finance-related roles. Almost the same number (just over 70%) of IT and physical sciences graduates entered employment, with IT and engineering being the most popular areas (interestingly, this group also had the highest numbers progressing on to PhD study). Biology and biomedical sciences, including psychology, had significant numbers entering psychology-related jobs, followed by health and then management professions. Of all science graduates, the highest number of all went into research and development;

- **the field** you wish to enter - some areas of work may require additional experience and further study. Entry to scientific research and development, for example, usually requires a PhD;

- **the type** of Masters course - this can influence how quickly you enter a graduate level job;

- **what skills, knowledge and experience** you already possess, both from your previous studies and other areas of your life - it may be possible to combine those gained from an undergraduate degree with those from your Masters. For example, a graduate in pharmacology with an MSc in Information Science would be well-placed to apply for information science positions in the pharmaceutical industry;

- **the ability to sell yourself and your qualification, and research your options** - chapter 6 ‘Down to you’ looks at how you can assess what skills you have gained from studying at Masters level.

Outlined are some of the main options you could consider after your Masters course:

- If you are following a more academic course, one obvious next step is to pursue an MPhil/PhD or other form of research programme, which could lead you into an academic career as either a lecturer or researcher in higher education or other related field, such as information/social research. See chapter 2 'Further study' for more details about this level of study. The AGCAS information booklet Your PhD... What Next? is also worth consulting for information on research-based careers.

- If you are keen to use the subject knowledge from your Masters, see the AGCAS Options Series, which are a good starting point for career ideas. AGCAS Occupational Profiles enable you to conduct more in-depth research into individual careers.

- If your course is vocational you may have already decided which career to enter. Do you have enough practical experience to begin applying for jobs? You may need to consider joining relevant professional bodies to learn about career development opportunities and how to maximise your chances of employment.

- If you are on a semi-vocational course, you may have gained a greater insight into a certain sector and now need to conduct more research into the range of options available. Here, the AGCAS Sector Briefings are very useful.

- Roughly 50% of graduates enter careers open to any discipline, ie those careers that are not degree-specific but require a range of transferable skills gained from your academic, life and work experience. Some of the ‘any discipline’ areas you could enter include general management, financial services, media, IT, advertising and marketing, public relations and law enforcement. For an overview of these options, see What Do Graduates Do? and the AGCAS information booklet Your Degree... What Next?

- Finally, you may still be unsure about which career you wish to enter and may benefit from taking some time out first. If well planned and organised, this can really help you decide what to do next. It will also increase your confidence, as well as boost your transferable skills. This may include voluntary work or taking on temporary contracts or shorter courses of study. See chapter 6 ‘Down to you’ for more guidance in this area.
4 Employment

Destination information from the 2003/04 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey revealed that, of those Masters graduates who responded, 69% entered work (in the UK) six months after graduating. Just over 3% remained unemployed. The figures are encouraging. However, in order to maximise your chances of entering employment, you need to be aware of the factors that may affect your chances and plan your job-hunting strategy with these in mind.

• Employment has changed in the last 40 years from a stable industrial structure dominated by the manufacturing industry to a much more volatile service-based industry.

• The graduate labour market is constantly changing as a result of globalisation – companies operate on a much more international basis with increasing competition from abroad.

• Technological advances have made the world a smaller place and changed the nature and location of many jobs. There has been an increase in people entering the multimedia, e-commerce, and creative and digital industries. Higher education has reacted to this by expanding the provision of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in these subject areas.

• A highly volatile political arena has affected the development of many companies.

• There has been an increase in the number of those opting for postgraduate study: 15 years ago there were 100,000; today there are over 400,000. With increasing numbers of graduates from a wider range of backgrounds, a postgraduate qualification is now being seen by many as essential, rather than a luxury, in order to be able to compete in an ever-changing employment market.

EFFECT ON EMPLOYABILITY

Gradually, we have seen graduates entering an increasingly diverse range of career areas; this is equally true for Masters graduates. It is much more common now to have a number of careers over a lifetime; the concept of the portfolio career is very much a reality.

As a Masters graduate you need to be flexible in order to remain employable.

‘To be employed is to be at risk, to be employable is to be secure.’ (Peter Hawkins, The Art of Building Windmills)

As companies have downsized, there has been a growth in the numbers of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and graduates being recruited by these companies. The growth of knowledge transfer partnerships (KTPs) between SMEs and higher education institutions (designed to exchange expertise and improve business competitiveness and productivity) is evidence of the value employers place on encouraging students to go on to further study whilst using their existing knowledge and skills to make an early and more rapid contribution to the business.

WHAT SKILLS DO MASTERS GRADUATES POSSESS?

It could be argued that, as a Masters graduate, you possess many of the skills gained from a degree but to a greater extent. Studying for a first degree requires a certain level of intellectual ability and motivation but completion of a Masters requires more commitment and capability. You will have developed skills such as critical thinking, planning, research, data collection and analysis, time management, project management, IT, verbal and written communication and analytical ability, all of which are highly transferable and not necessarily subject-specific. Employers will also value the more technical/vocational skills some of you may have gained from specific Masters study.

There are many more, sometimes unexpected, personal benefits to be gained from studying a Masters degree.

‘E-learning has been a huge learning curve. Joining a discussion group and engaging in chat room discussions are all new to me, as is writing academic assignments. It has instantly made me think more about professional issues and has increased my knowledge base. It has also increased my self-esteem, confidence, joy of learning and ability to work more ethically.’ (Mature student, MSc Health and Medical Sciences)
WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT FROM MASTERS GRADUATES?

From a survey entitled *North West Employers’ Needs and Expectations of Postgraduate Skills*, a number of employers who specifically wanted to recruit postgraduates did so for their knowledge of real work, gained from studying vocational and technical courses, and their very specific skills related to the business. The same survey also highlighted a wide variety of other ‘softer’ skills. These included research skills, the ability to innovate and use initiative, the ability to generate new ideas, and self-motivation.

Studying at Masters level gives you more time to develop these skills and may help you to appreciate how they can be used in a commercial context. Indeed, some of these opinions seem to be echoed by Masters students themselves:

‘The qualification itself is good but it is not enough. The main point is the knowledge and understanding that you gain through the course. Therefore, it is very important that you study a broad spectrum of different topics well and develop your personal skills in parallel with your course.’ (Masters student, information management)

Are these transferable skills and knowledge gained from a Masters degree enough to gain you meaningful employment or do you need anything else?

In 2002, Sheffield Hallam University’s Employability Working Group defined employability as:

‘Enabling students to acquire the knowledge, personal and professional skills and encouraging the attitudes that will support their future development and employment.’

These skills can be used in a wide range of tasks/situations within all subject areas, jobs and life experiences. So, as a Masters graduate, you need to consider what you have to offer to an employer in a much broader, more holistic way, which reflects what is currently happening in terms of the employability debate.

Institutions are increasingly concerned with developing students’ employability so that they can cope with an ever-changing labour market, manage their own careers and remain employable. This has happened at first degree level with the introduction of career management modules, which give credit towards a degree, where more students are engaging in work-related learning through work experience and practical projects. At postgraduate level, employers support employability through their involvement in and support of the development of the curriculum on such courses as the new route PhD, which includes large elements of career management skills, and vocationally orientated professional doctorates.

Being able to reflect and assess yourself at each stage of your career is vital if you are to remain employable and develop your career. For more information about career management skills and careers action planning, see chapter 6 ‘Down to you’.

In summary, employers value the ability of Masters graduates to:

• plan and manage their careers effectively;
• develop excellent communication, interpersonal and research skills;
• develop effective personal presentation and networking skills;
• manage their time and work independently;
• take on early responsibility;
• work well in a team;
• make an early contribution to a business.

MARKETING YOURSELF TO EMPLOYERS

The key to success in finding suitable employment is knowing how to market your transferable skills successfully to employers; possession of a Masters degree alone is not enough to prove you are the most suitable candidate for a job - you need to consider what you have to offer as a whole. This will include knowledge gained from your Masters, including specific technical skills, and the transferable skills gained from work experience, including voluntary experience, practical projects and extracurricular responsibilities, such as leisure activities.

You need to spend time working on how to ‘sell’ yourself on paper by putting together an effective CV and covering letter, which outlines the skills, knowledge and attitudes employers are seeking. Some employers use their own application forms and increasing numbers ask you to complete an online application form. The AGCAS information booklet *Making Applications* offers advice on constructing a CV and covering letter. Tackling
online applications is dealt with in the AGCAS DVD Your Job’s Online. Those of you who may be applying to the multinational graduate recruiters, who use assessment centres as part of their selection process, should consult the AGCAS information booklet Going for Interviews.

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

Most employers do not have a separate recruitment strategy for postgraduates. (Exceptions to this are research-based opportunities, which can be found on a number of specific websites, such as Jobs.ac.uk. See also the AGCAS information booklet Your PhD... What Next? for details of where to find research vacancies.) You will need to use a range of job search strategies to identify the maximum range of opportunities: look for vacancies in local and regional newspapers, in journals, on websites and via recruitment agencies. See the Recruitment and Employment Confederation for a list of accredited recruitment agencies by location and specialist area or use the Yellow Pages for lists of general agencies. Graduate careers fairs are also worth visiting; ask at your university careers service or check on Prospects.ac.uk for events in your area.

You can also identify opportunities by applying speculatively to companies. Use business directories, such as Kompass, to identify more general employers and specialist directories for vacancies in certain sectors. For graduate employers, see the Prospects Directory and The Hobsons Directory. For vacancies in SMEs, try local press, business libraries, the British Chambers of Commerce and regional graduate databases. The AGCAS publication Where Next? will help you identify local, regional and national employers. Do some research yourself and find out who has been recruiting recently in your area. The websites of professional bodies are also worth checking out. Your Masters course may have strong links with local, regional and national employers through work experience placements and practical course projects who may be worth approaching. Indeed, some Masters courses receive vacancy information directly from employers who target them on an annual basis expressly for their students’ particular skills and knowledge.

See the AGCAS information booklet Job Seeking Strategies for more job hunting tips.

5 Other options

SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Self-employment is becoming an increasingly attractive option for Masters graduates, with many of the skills you gain from Masters level study transferable to setting up your own business: project management; commercial awareness (through practical employer-led projects); enhanced communication skills; the ability to think more critically and analytically; and personal stamina. The enterprise initiative is being given increasing priority in higher education institutions as part of the national strategy to develop the employability of students.

As a first step, it is worth finding out what types of enterprise activity exist in your institution. For example, Sheffield Hallam University’s Enterprise Centre is very active in helping to develop enterprise skills in students through a variety of activities:

- organises the annual Enterprise Challenge - awards £5,000 to the student with the best idea for setting up a new business;
- provides the opportunity for students to take part in regional and national enterprise competitions, such as Venturefest and IBM Universities’ Business Challenge;
- runs employer-led workshops to help students develop management skills through the Learn to Lead programme;
- offers one-to-one business advice, workshops and mentoring to students interested in self-employment through organisations such as Business Link.

Since many small businesses fail within the first two years, it is essential that you seek as much advice and guidance as possible. You should see self-employment as a long-term commitment rather than a career you can launch into and be successful in overnight.
There are some financial incentives available to new businesses: some are for specific age groups, such as Shell LiveWIRE, which helps young people in the 16-30 age range set up new businesses; and some are for specific industries, such as the rapidly growing creative and digital technology sector. Organisations such as Business Link can advise you on how to finance a new business through available grants.

Nationally, the Small Business Service, Jobcentre Plus and Business Link all offer advice on setting up a new business, including access to free training courses on topics such as creating a business plan, marketing your business and finance. The AGCAS information booklet Self-employment and Prospects' online Self-employment Community (www.prospects.ac.uk/startup) provide more detailed information.

VOLUNTARY WORK

Voluntary work has traditionally been recognised as something people do for a ‘worthy’ cause, often within a social or care-based environment. In reality, it is now much broader than that. As there is now an increasing need for people to have experience, particularly in the popular arts/media and creative industries, students are seeking more varied opportunities for voluntary work so they can compete in these highly competitive areas.

Voluntary work can help you gain or enhance key skills and experience for entry into your chosen career. It can also help you test out your suitability for a career. It can be just as valuable as paid work experience and, for many, the most realistic first step into a job. Many professions actively encourage students to first try voluntary work before applying for entry into their chosen field; social work, for example, requires applicants to have significant relevant experience before applying for one of the postgraduate training courses.

One increasingly popular option is working overseas. This allows you to develop key skills and experience with the added benefit of taking on board the challenge of working in a different culture, perhaps using language skills. There is a tremendous range of opportunities available: some more adventurous projects require you to raise significant funds in order to take part; others, such as Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), may require you to be professionally trained and experienced in a certain area before you can apply to work on projects.

Early preparation and planning is essential, whether your intention is to do voluntary work on a short-term basis in the vacation or longer term as part of a gap year.

See the AGCAS Sector Briefing Voluntary Sector for an overview of working in this area. For those interested in working abroad, see the range of AGCAS Country Profiles (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Countries) and the AGCAS information booklets Working in Europe - First Steps, Working Abroad and Using Languages.

WORK EXPERIENCE

This need not necessarily require a long-term commitment from you; you may benefit from doing a short period of work experience in a company, from as little as a few days to a number of weeks. This could entail work shadowing, conducting interviews and doing some work-related tasks. This can be a very valuable way of helping you gain useful insights into an employer or sector.

For work experience ideas and opportunities, see work-experience.org (the National Council for Work Experience) or Prospects Work Experience, available from your university careers service. Also check out the AGCAS video Can I have a Few Minutes of Your Time? for helpful hints on using networking techniques to help you secure work experience.

6 Down to you

What stage have you reached in your career planning? What do you need to do next in order to reach your goals? Consider each of the statements below and decide which best fits your situation at the moment.
- I have definite career plans and know how to achieve them.
- I have some ideas but am not sure what to do next.
- I have a few vague ideas.
- I do not have any ideas.

Whichever point you are starting from, you now need to consider how you can move yourself
forward in order to reach your goal. This chapter introduces you to the concept of careers action planning and the career management skills you will develop as a result of going through this process.

To get a clear picture of your current situation, it is important to look back at your previous experience as a whole and analyse how you made decisions so that you can make well-informed decisions in the future.

Creating a careers action plan will help you to improve your self-awareness, decision-making and time management skills. It is an educational process that can also be applied to other major life decisions, which may require careful planning, research and execution.

WHAT IS A CAREERS ACTION PLAN?

It is a plan that includes all the steps you need to take you from where you are now to where you want to be in the future. Before you begin to formulate your careers action plan, you should think about a timeframe for what you hope to achieve.

You may find it useful to look at your career in terms of short, medium and long-term goals.

• Once you have completed your Masters degree, your immediate priority or short-term goal may be to find work quickly in order to start paying off any loans you may have taken out to fund your course. It is unlikely that this will represent your ideal career but it may be something you have a lot of experience in already; it may even be a part-time job you can turn into a full-time possibility.

• A medium-term goal may involve taking time out to prepare for entry into your chosen career. If your Masters is non-vocational, you may benefit from broadening your work experience so that you gain more related experience to help you enter your chosen field. Relevant experience could well turn out to be a very useful foot in the door.

• Your long-term goal is to reach your career aim and then develop it from there. If you are on a vocational or semi-vocational Masters course, you may be thinking about which employers offer opportunities for personal development, such as training programmes and mentoring schemes. You may wish to look into existing career structures and opportunities for progression and promotion.

'I see this qualification as one which will enable me to progress to being a lecturer in higher education, involved in the training of nurses on graduate courses.' (A qualified adult branch nurse, with ten years’ experience, studying for a Masters in health care policy and research)

Your timeframe need not be set in stone; your plan should be seen as an ongoing cyclical process. Indeed, it should be reviewed regularly and adjusted to suit your circumstances, accommodating any changes of direction and other more personal factors, which you may have no control over.

The following is an outline of how you can progress through each stage of your careers action plan and what resources are available to help you do this.

STAGE ONE - WHERE AM I NOW?

At this stage, you need to begin with some self-assessment to build up a detailed profile of yourself. You could make a list, perhaps in the style of a CV, including: your present studies; key projects; other qualifications, both academic and vocational; past and present work experience, both paid and unpaid; and any responsibilities and achievements gained from leisure activities.

How do you assess your skills?

You may find the thought of a critical self-evaluation an uncomfortable idea or one which is totally alien to you. You will need to overcome this; self-assessment is a vital part of careers action planning – you need to have an accurate understanding of what makes you tick so that you are able to:

• make informed choices about your preferred work areas;

• match yourself against a range of careers;

• provide evidence of your suitability for specific jobs.

The following ideas and resources may help you through the process of self-assessment:

• Prospects Planner - this computer-based self-assessment package helps you to consider your skills, abilities, needs and values and then matches these to possible job areas. It is available in most higher education careers services and online at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pplanner.

• The Art of Building Windmills: Career Tactics for the 21st Century - contains excellent self-
assessment and career management skills materials, including the ‘ME plc’ exercise, ‘skill check’ and ‘career fitness check’.

- **One-to-one careers appointment** - you may find it useful to book an appointment with a higher education careers adviser in order to discuss your skills assessment more fully.
- **Personal Development Planning (PDP) and progress files** - thorough assessment of yourself involves personal reflection. Your course may include PDP-type activities (sometimes referred to as CPD - continuing professional development - on professional/vocational courses) or require the production of a progress file, which can prepare you for self-assessment.

Self-assessment should not be viewed in isolation from your personal circumstances. You may need to take a number of things into account: how geographically mobile you are; disability/health issues; care responsibilities; family commitments. See the AGCAS publication *A Level Playing Field* for useful guidance and further resources to help you tackle these and other related issues.

**STAGE TWO - WHERE DO I WANT TO BE?**

Once you have conducted a detailed self-assessment, you now need to consider what you have discovered about yourself and what you want to do after your Masters.

- You may already have a firm career idea in your mind; you may be ready to start applying for jobs - see chapter 4 ‘Employment’ for tips on how to sell yourself and your qualification effectively to an employer.
- If you want to opt for further study beyond Masters level you will need to look at the range of courses on offer - see chapter 2 ‘Further study’.
- Perhaps you want to take time out travelling abroad, doing voluntary work or broadening your work experience. The idea of self-employment may appeal - see chapter 5 ‘Other options’ for some useful starting points.

You should consider how all these options might fit into your long-term plans.

**STAGE THREE - HOW DO I GET THERE?**

This is where you need to use what you have discovered about yourself during the self-assessment stage of careers action planning.

If you have a particular career in mind, you will need to investigate things like entry requirements, likely employers and application methods. You may need to revise your plans at this stage if you discover you do not have the necessary entry requirements and take some time out to achieve them. This could involve gaining relevant experience through paid or voluntary work.

If you have some idea of what you want to do, starting out in a lower-level role enables you to test out your suitability for a job without making a long-term commitment to it, for example, assistant psychologist for entry into clinical psychology or physiotherapy assistant for entry into physiotherapy.

If you do not have any firm ideas, you could begin with some suggestions thrown up from your Prospects Planner session. You could also check out the destinations statistics for your course via your university careers service or ‘What Do Postgraduates Do?’ ([www.prospects.ac.uk/links/WDPD](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/WDPD)), which contains details of Masters graduate destinations. Consult the AGCAS Options Series for ideas on how to use the skills and knowledge gained from your subject area and see the AGCAS Occupational Profiles for detailed information on entry routes and requirements, job descriptions, work conditions, types of employers and vacancy sources.

**STAGE FOUR - DECISION-MAKING**

Before you can move on to the stage where you begin to take action, you need to examine how you make effective decisions. You may find that your decision-making style presents obstacles, which may prevent you from moving forward in your career.

**What is your decision-making style?**

- Are you a procrastinator? Do you always put off things until tomorrow?
- Are you impulsive? Are you over-anxious to get a task started instead of taking a step back in order to look at all the possible implications of a decision?
- Do you try to hedge your bets? Do you apply for everything rather than focusing on one specific option?
- Do you avoid making any decision because you may be afraid of making the wrong decision?
What are the obstacles to good decision-making?

• Poor knowledge of all the options open to you and lack of awareness about your own strengths and weaknesses.
• Wanting the perfect career and being unable or unwilling to compromise and fix on one that offers most of the elements you desire. You need to accept that no one career is perfect. You need to find a job that satisfies most of your requirements; this is where detailed knowledge can help you make the right decision. Talking to people who actually do the job can help with this.
• Too scared of taking risks, trying out new things and stepping outside your personal comfort zone. How will you ever know what you are capable of if you never try out new experiences?
• Lacking confidence in your abilities. Be positive and trust your own instincts and insights about what you want and can do.
• Lacking in honesty about what you can realistically achieve.
• Unable to commit to a decision you have made.

It is possible to learn how to make good decisions or to improve your decision-making style. Have a look at this model of decision-making:

• Become more self-aware of your feelings, skills, interests and personal constraints.
• Find out as much as you can about your range of options and weigh up the disadvantages and advantages in a very objective way.
• Make a provisional decision, ask yourself how it feels, sleep on it, come back to it again and re-assess how it feels after you have had time to consider it.
• Make a definite decision and ask others for feedback.
• Make a commitment to your decision and stick to it.
• Try not to worry about your decision; if you have fully assessed the situation and all possible options you have nothing to fear.
• Finally, reflect on how you reached your decision and how successful the outcome was for you. This will help you when it comes to making any future decisions.

STAGE FIVE - WHAT ACTIONS DO I NEED TO TAKE?

Looking at the decisions you have made, now ask yourself what actions you have to take. This could include a range of activities from:
• assessing your skills and options further;
• compiling a covering letter, CV and/or application form;
• identifying suitable employers and locating vacancies;
• submitting applications for jobs/courses;
• seeing a careers adviser to help you clarify the next step.

STAGE SIX - REVIEW

Ask yourself what has happened as a result of the actions you have taken.
• Have you now reached your goal?
• Do you have more steps to take? Do you know what these are?
• Have your circumstances changed so that you now need a re-think?

Remember, careers action planning is very much a cyclical process, which may require you to keep returning to stage one in order to go through the process again.

These six stages should have given you a structure with which to approach careers action planning and helped you develop or enhance your career management skills. You should now be much more adept at:
• self-reflection - to be able to accurately assess what you have learnt from all your experiences, continually review how your career is progressing and identify any further steps you may need to take;
• self-assessment - you must know yourself well enough, both strengths and weaknesses, so that you can select suitable opportunities;
• decision-making - this is important at each stage of careers action planning;
• planning - you need to know what you need to do, when and how, and take account of unforeseen events;
• self-organisation - to enable you to take full responsibility for your own career development;
• time management and prioritisation - you need to know how much time to devote to the various activities involved in careers action planning;
• research and information gathering - this will ensure you are fully aware of all the options open to you, which puts you in the best position to assess your chances.

The whole process of career planning is rarely quick; researching options alone can involve many hours of reading and talking to people. You should start the process early. Others will do all they can to encourage and help you but, ultimately, it is down to you.
7 Information sources

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Applying for a PGCE; Going for Interviews; Job Seeking Strategies; Making Applications; Postgraduate Study and Research; Self-employment; Using Languages; Where Next?; Working Abroad; Working in Europe - First Steps; Your Degree... What Next?; Your PhD ... What Next?

Sector Briefings:
Voluntary Sector
A Level Playing Field
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AGCAS Occupational Profiles
AGCAS Options Series
AGCAS Vocational Course Surveys

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**ADDRESSES**

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Tel: 0117 987 6543 www.ahrb.ac.uk

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon SN2 1UH Tel: 01793 413 200 www.bbsrc.ac.uk

British Chambers of Commerce, 65, Petty France SW1H 9EU Tel: 020 654 5800 www.chamberonline.co.uk

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Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC), 36-38 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RG Tel: 020 7462 3260 www.rec.uk.com

SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities), Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London SE1 3JW Tel: 020 7450 0620 www.skill.org.uk

Student Loans Company, 100 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 7JD Tel: 0800 405 010 www.slc.co.uk

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Options (A4 sheets)
Ideas of what you can do with your subject of study, with details of skills gained, jobs related to your degree, further study and other options.
www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options

Sector Briefings (A5 booklets)
Overviews of the key job sectors, providing an insight into the culture, tips for entry and progression, and examples of typical jobs and leading employers.
www.prospects.ac.uk/links/SectorBs

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Focusing on over 400 different types of jobs, with details of entry requirements, salary ranges, typical employers and vacancy sources.
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