

Eight-step plan for postgrad future

Postgraduate study can be daunting, so choose carefully to avoid making serious errors

COMMENT
Michael Cross

For prospective postgraduate candidates, making choices about postgraduate studies and deciding what is best for them represent perhaps the most difficult challenges facing students today.

Unlike with undergraduate studies, decisions and choices about postgraduate fields of specialisation that matches one's abilities, and secures employment, could be disastrous for one's future.

Also, their choices and decisions at this stage will shape their professional trajectories. A mistake in choosing a field of specialisation that matches one's abilities, and secures employment, could be disastrous for one's future.

There are important indicators that can provide candidates for postgraduate study with a useful frame of reference for making their choices. Here are eight considerations that, according to experienced postgraduate students, all candidates should pay attention to:

From undergraduate to postgraduate studies

Understanding the nature of this transition is an important starting point. Its defining features include:

- Intensification of individual reflective practice through research in addition to the coursework components in the curriculum;

- More individual autonomy and independence as postgraduate students develop the ability to undertake their academic work independently under the guidance of their supervisors or advisers;

- Greater focus on specialisation in the area of study vis-à-vis more general knowledge provided at the undergraduate level;

- Stronger links between university experience and the workplace mainly through research or apprenticeship/practice; and

- New forms of institutional mediation that require development of self-confidence and individual assertiveness in the way students think, articulate or voice and justify their ideas and views, for instance by means of seminars, writing workshops, publications and academic enrichment activities.

Personal vision and goals

"Aligned ambition" is an attribute that characterises all those students who are able to develop a vision, set goals and devise strategies to achieve their goals. Not all candidates can claim to possess such an attribute.

Nonetheless, they can draw on their experiences during their undergraduate studies or advice from friends, relatives or lecturers to set realistic goals about what they want to achieve with their studies — such as to be more effective in their professional careers, to get a better job or change jobs, or to arrive at a better understanding of a research issue.

The important thing is that their ambitions should take into consideration their previous studies, the question of employability and their own intellectual abilities. The credibility of the institution, departments and academic staff they may



Further study: Think hard about your own concerns, needs and questions to get the advice that's best for you. Photo: Reuters

be associated with throughout their studies is also important. Before making any commitment, visit the relevant departments and speak with the course presenters or course co-ordinators. Make sure suitable supervisors are available for your area of specialisation.

The area of study or specialisation

There are three key avenues for students to pursue in approaching their careers and making study choices. First, they may see a particular area of study as useful to secure a job, and for this purpose they may seek advice about the best ways of responding to the job market through their studies. Or they may just think of an economic advantage that a degree can purchase: "I want to do quantity surveying to contribute to the construction industry and help in the infrastructure development, where I know I will get a good job."

Second, they may see the value of what they study in better understanding themselves, the communities in which they live or other communities: "I want to learn about new cultures or how things are done in other countries in order to know what should happen in my own community."

Third, beyond material benefits, they may attach to their degree altruistic concerns such as the promotion of social justice: "I want to be a human rights lawyer to fight against human rights abuse."

An important principle is that, whatever choice candidates make, it must be matched with their own abilities as demonstrated throughout their undergraduate studies and with the kind of programmes or courses they have chosen.

Negotiating learning spaces

Besides the academic unit in which students undertake their studies and the university residence where they may stay, there are several intersecting contexts that can influence the work of a postgraduate student. These include family, networks of friends, religious, political and social associations in which a candidate may have membership, and, in the case of part-time students, the workplace.

It is essential to negotiate a learning space in these contexts — that is, conditions that will contribute positively to their studies, whether a working space, time, understanding, or just emotional support.

For instance, spouses or partners need to know what time will be dedicated to studies, particularly when

there are financial implications, and children should not suffer because their parents are studying.

In other words, it is important to know how to deal with the challenges of balancing the demands of academic work and social life, especially in the case of students who have to work part-time to raise or supplement their resources to cover university costs.

Student wellness services

Universities have a wide range of

support services and activities for postgraduate students, including academic ones (such as writing centres and tutorial services), career counselling and placement advice (for part-time work to supplement university costs), childcare, financial aid and others that concern wellness, security and safety.

It is important to inquire about these services to secure access where it is required. There are also often peer programmes for learning, mentoring and orientation that could be useful for postgraduate induction.

Securing accommodation for postgraduate students

The power of residence culture in influencing academic success and social integration of students at a university cannot be underestimated at the postgraduate level.

Residences are places of intense social activities organised around committees of various kinds dealing with inter-residence socials, community outreach, team-building, leadership training, sports, entertainment, spiritual life, and so on. This rich network of people and activities provides an important way of breaking into university life for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Orientation or induction week

Although staff members should always be ready to advise and guide

postgraduate candidates, students can only get the advice that is best for them when they are clear about their own concerns, needs and questions. It is critical that candidates prepare themselves with queries about anything concerning their studies, such as course content, venues, student support services, IT and library access, expectations, duties and responsibilities.

At this early stage, questions about policies, procedures, activities and expectations must be posed to the relevant departments.

Networks of civic engagement

Students on campuses organise themselves into various networks or student associations that serve many useful purposes, such as co-ordination, communication and collaboration. These networks help students to understand their subjects and work with each other.

They offer a unique opportunity for bonding with old friends, linking with new friends and interacting with those who can help new postgraduate students to succeed in their studies, particularly when the friendship is also experienced at academic and learning levels.

Professor Michael Cross is in the department of education and curriculum studies in the University of Johannesburg's education faculty

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
for tomorrow

**ASPIRE
ACHIEVE**

Postgraduate studies

Future dreams and ambitions are inherent in every one of us, but our future dreams are inspired by an initial individual aspiration, a starting point where you look at yourself and say 'yes I can, and I will achieve'.

With more than 320 postgraduate programmes across a vast selection of disciplines and over 200 short courses available, NMMU offers what you need to take a step closer to realising your ambitions.

Contact us today
• Jo-Ann Daniels • Tel: 041 504 2162
• E-mail: postgrad@nmmu.ac.za

www.nmmu.ac.za