# From Undergraduate to Postgraduate Study – An overview

## How is postgraduate different to undergraduate study?

## Postgraduate study includes both Masters and Doctoral Research courses. Masters can be taught or research-based, while Doctorates (PhDs) are purely based on research. There are key differences between postgraduate-level and undergraduate-level study:

* **Specialisation** – while undergraduate study tends to cover breadth of subject (e.g. English Literature), postgraduate-level study tends to focus on a specific topic in-depth (e.g. a particular genre or historical context within English Literature).
* **Emphasis on self-directed study** – Large-group teaching is less frequent at Masters-level and does not exist for PhDs; instead there is a greater emphasis on self-directed study. Consequently, there are fewer contact hours in postgraduate study than in undergraduate programmes. For PhD students, this contact time usually comprises meetings with your supervisor to discuss the process of your doctoral thesis.
* **Emphasis on independent and more advanced research skills** - (see study guide on ‘Postgraduate Research’).

## Taught Masters Study

Taught masters builds on the skills you have already begun to develop at undergraduate-level. Generally taught masters programmes:

* Consist of modules taught by a lecturer, requiring you to attend lectures and seminars, and complete assignments.
* Require the focus of assignments to be more in-depth and specialised than those at undergraduate-level.
* Involve more extensive and advanced reading.
* Require a high degree of engagement with and contribution to seminar discussions.
* Involve some form of research training component leading to an extended individual research project or dissertation to conclude the course.

**Masters-level dissertations** vary widely from programme to programme, but you can expect to write around 15,000 words. The process involves:

* Developing a focused enquiry into an aspect of your subject, with clear parameters.
* Developing a rigorous scholarly methodology to research it.
* A convincing approach to analysis of a range of material that collectively develops and supports an argument.
* Developing a sophisticated awareness of existing scholarship relevant to your topic.
* Developing a clear case for your contribution to ongoing debates.

The dissertation is an opportunity to draw upon the aptitude for self-directed study and critical thinking you have developed, together with the research training you will have received, and will be good preparation should you be considering progressing to PhD research.

## Doctoral (PhD) students

A PhD is a postgraduate doctoral degree, awarded to students who complete an original thesis offering a significant new contribution to knowledge in their subject. PhD qualifications are available in all subjects and are normally the highest level of academic degree a person can achieve. Although a PhD is a pure research degree it is, in fact, a diverse and varied qualification with many different components. A typical PhD normally involves:

* Carrying out a literature review.
* Conducting original research and collecting your results.
* Producing a thesis that presents your conclusions.
* Defending your thesis in an oral viva voce exam.

**Below shows the structure of a typical three-year fulltime PhD:

However, very few PhD experiences are just about researching and writing up a thesis. You are also likely to do some (or all) of the following during your PhD:

* Teaching
* Conference presentations
* Publications
* Public engagement and communications

These experiences will be an important part of your development as a researcher and academic and will enhance the value of your PhD regardless of your career plans.

## Academic Skills for Postgraduate Study

The Skills for Academic Success (S.A.S.) team provides students with support in making the transition into Postgraduate study, particularly in developing the academic skills required for you to succeed in your Postgraduate degree. This includes:

* Getting the most from lectures, seminars and supervision.
* Academic reading and criticality.
* Using research to develop and support ideas.
* Referencing.
* Planning and developing a written assignment e.g. research or project proposal, report, academic paper, literature review, thesis.
* Understanding specific principles of mathematics and statistics, from basic to advanced.
* Presenting ideas using both visual and verbal approaches.
* Research methods e.g. developing questionnaires, surveys and interview schedules.
* Linguistic development for different purposes and audiences.
* Managing multiple projects and responsibilities.

and much more…

Check out our study guide on ‘Undertaking Postgraduate Research’.

Visit the Skills for Academic Success Team (S.A.S.) for help throughout your Postgraduate study.

Source: Find A Masters (2019). *Differences Between Undergraduate and Postgraduate Study*. Available from: <https://www.findamasters.com/advice/doing/undergraduate-postgraduate-differences.aspx>

Source: Find A PhD (2019). *What is a PhD?* Available from: <https://www.findaphd.com/advice/finding/what-is-a-phd.aspx>

Scan the QR code to book appointments, view our events calendar, watch skills videos and more…

A qr code on a white background

Description automatically generated