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1 Introduction

A postgraduate course is more than simply a period of study and research; it is also, crucially, a time for reflection and self-development. One of the greatest challenges that you now face is that of self-management, not only in your academic work but also in the ways in which you use the opportunities open to you to develop transferable skills that will be of benefit to you in all aspects of your future career. As a postgraduate, you are embarking on a journey that will be exciting, satisfying and challenging. You will spend much of your time feeling in control and focused on your course, but there will be stages on your journey when you might feel less sure of yourself and your studying, when the path ahead is unclear. That is where this book comes in: it will guide you through the rockier patches and help you to overcome any problems as you encounter them.

► The purpose of this book

This is not a traditional study skills guide. It will help you when you come to produce an assessed piece of work, give a presentation or face a seminar, but it is also concerned with the overall management of your course. Making a success of your time as a postgraduate involves so much more than just getting through the course. With this in mind, this book will give you guidance on the day-to-day processes of your course, but it will also offer you the opportunity to rise above the everyday aspects in order to take an overview, to take control of the experience of being a postgraduate. In this way you can make the most of this chance to develop your skills base, maximise your learning opportunities and widen your understanding, both of yourself and the subject area with which you are engaged. When you feel that things are going well, it will help you to assess your success and analyse where to go next in order to build on that success. When you feel isolated, confused or just plain demoralised, it will reaffirm for you that your difficulties are both a normal part of the postgraduate experience and entirely surmountable.

2 How to Manage your Postgraduate Course

A guide such as this can be used in several ways. You will probably make an initial reading of the book and then refer back to sections of it as your course progresses and your needs alter. In order to make the support it offers as accessible and relevant to you as possible, each chapter begins with a troubleshooting guide which outlines the issues discussed in that chapter, helping you to get to the information that you need as quickly as possible. Each chapter closes with a spot guide, outlining the key points covered in the chapter, so that you can confirm your earlier reading and check that you are still on track. Throughout the book the emphasis is upon practical help and support, with examples to support the advice offered and effective techniques outlined in step-by-step guides to success in every area of your course.

Your needs as a postgraduate will vary according to your experience, existing skills base and expectations. There are three principal routes into a postgraduate course:

1. *The undergraduate route:* if you have moved straight from an undergraduate to a postgraduate course, you will be familiar with many of the demands placed upon you. Being asked to produce essays or presentations may not faze you, but you may need more help than you had anticipated in making the transition from being an undergraduate to a postgraduate. You will, of course, have expected the level of studying to be higher, but you might encounter other changes for which you are less prepared, such as smaller seminar groups, independent research, the relationship with your supervisor and the need to move towards a career beyond your present course. These changes are all part of the excitement of being a postgraduate, but you need to be ready to meet them as they arise and cope with every situation with as much confidence and energy as possible. If you have moved into the UK university system from an undergraduate course in another country, the challenges need not necessarily be any greater. You will, after all, be ready to face a whole new cultural and educational experience, and this book will help you to get your bearings in the early days of your course and support you as the course develops so that you can make the most of everything that it offers.
2. *Professional development:* a postgraduate course that is entered into as part of a plan of professional development can seem relatively simple in prospect. You are in command of your subject, you have experience in the field and all you have to do now is gain the qualification. The reality of a postgraduate course can come as a shock, as you face a way of working that may well be alien to you and become part of an academic community with which you are unfamiliar. You have all the tools that you

need for success to hand, of course, but you might need help in assessing those tools and then employing them to greatest effect as you work through your course. Postgraduates who see their course as merely part of their professional life can miss one of the most rewarding aspects of the postgraduate experience: that of moving away from your everyday work life to immerse yourself in a new way of working and a more considered way of seeing things, leaving you with a new view of both your work life and your personal and professional development. This guide will ensure that you can gain this new and revealing perspective.

3. *Assessment of prior learning*: it may be that you have become a postgraduate without ever having been a graduate, or perhaps your postgraduate course has little to do with your degree subject. In either case, the assessment of prior learning, or prior experience, is increasingly being recognised as an important route into postgraduate work. You may not have studied in a formal way for some time; in which case you will find this book useful both in helping you to transfer your existing skills into the postgraduate format and in reassuring you that you are not alone in your experiences.

► **Taking an overview of your course**

Whatever your route into your course, you are now a postgraduate like any other, with your own misgivings, perhaps, but also with a unique set of skills and experiences. One of the key aims of this book is to help you to recognise, assess and then develop those skills, both whilst you study and beyond your current course. However you began on this journey, one thing remains constant for the vast majority of postgraduates: time simply goes by too fast. You begin by thinking that you have plenty of time to achieve all that you have set out to do, and at points you might begin to feel as if you are on a never-ending course, but for the majority of the time, and certainly as you near the end of your course, you will be amazed at how fast it has gone, how quickly the experience seems to be over. It is for this reason that managing your course, rather than just getting through it, is vital. If you waste valuable time trying to work out where to be and what to do, spend anxious weeks worrying about how to get useful feedback or wondering whether you will be able to cope with the next task, you will never be able to regain that time – time that you need to be spending elsewhere. It is possible to get so much more out of a postgraduate course than simply a qualification. This is your opportunity (perhaps your only opportunity for several more years) to assess your abilities in a structured environment, meet new challenges that will hone your skills and explore subject areas and ways of expressing yourself that you may never have thought about before.

4 How to Manage your Postgraduate Course

All this is possible, but only if you take control of the situation now and then move forward with confidence in what you are doing and an awareness of what you might yet do. Postgraduate courses vary enormously in what they have to offer and the ways in which they progress their students through a course. If you recognise the type of course that you are on, and consider other courses that might be available to you in the future, you will have begun to take control. Outlined below are some of the principal course structures, with a brief evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses from the students' point of view.

Taught courses

These courses are most commonly found in the early stages of a postgraduate career: masters courses, postgraduate diplomas or postgraduate certificates, for example. You are likely to find that the structure of the work is similar in many ways to undergraduate work. You will be asked to produce written pieces of work, perhaps to give presentations and complete more complex pieces of assessed coursework. Added to this, particularly if you are on a masters course, you will be asked to produce a piece of independent research-based work. This could take the form of an extended project or dissertation, which will vary in length depending upon the course that you are undertaking.

The *advantage* of this type of course is that you can rely upon the course tutors to guide you effectively through the process. You will be offered close supervision of any work that you undertake and your endeavours will be fully backed up by taught sessions. One of the key benefits, particularly if you have been away from study for a time or struggle to work in isolation, is that you are likely to find yourself working in a cohesive group of students, from whom you can gain support and reassurance.

The *potential disadvantage* of this type of course is that you may find yourself restricted in the work that you do. Although some independent research will be possible, indeed it is likely to be expected of you, you will essentially be following a cohesive and probably well-established course, which can curtail your freedom to roam more widely in your subject area.

Remember, if you are on this type of course, to make the most of the support that is to be gained from being taught directly in this way, but also make sure that you know as early as possible just how much freedom you will be given to pursue your own specialist area of interest as the course develops.

Research courses

Although doctorates form the bulk of research-only postgraduate courses, there is growing recognition of the value of allowing postgraduate students

at all levels to tailor their course, and their research, to their interests and experience. This is particularly true in cases where professionals are aiming to gain a postgraduate qualification in order to consolidate and validate their career-based expertise.

The *advantage* of these courses is that they can fit in with the other demands on your time. They allow you the freedom to investigate areas of research that are of interest to you and can be spread over a greater period of time than taught courses.

The *potential disadvantage* of these courses is that they can leave you feeling isolated. You might be working for the majority of your time with one supervisor whose aim will be to support and guide you through your research. Despite the fact that your supervisor will be an expert in your field and will want to help you as much as possible, you might miss out on opportunities in your area of study unless you keep your ear close to the ground and ensure that you avoid too high a level of isolation.

Remember, if you are on this type of course, that you will need to establish a stable and wide-ranging support structure for yourself and ensure that you have a clear view of where your research might lead you in the future.

Combined courses

These are perhaps the most common type of postgraduate course. Even in the case of PhD courses there may be an element of teaching, particularly in the early stages, whilst those courses that are intended to be heavily based upon teaching may still have elements of independent research. It may be, for example, that a series of seminars or lectures form the backbone of a course, but that students are encouraged to follow their own line of study, potentially making such seminars and lectures appear to be optional.

The *advantage* of a course such as this is that you can have the best of both worlds, in that you can be supported by a taught course whilst being given the freedom to explore your own interests.

The *potential disadvantages* of this type of course are that you might find the structured part of the course onerous at times, or you might feel stranded if the research element is a final addition to the course, undertaken once the teaching has finished.

Remember, if you are on this type of course, that you will need to manage your studying to make the most of the taught element of the course by keeping one eye on how you can use it to support your research.

Distance and open learning courses

Increasingly popular, particularly for those courses predominantly aimed at postgraduates who are juggling other commitments with their studying, these can be an attractive option. They are likely to rely upon a combination

of teaching formats, from the Internet and emailing, to hard copy teaching packs, to occasional contact backed up by individual tuition.

The *advantages* of courses such as these are clear: you can fit your studying around your professional and personal commitments, you can work to some extent at your own pace and you can learn within a medium that suits you (particularly if you are technologically minded).

The *potential disadvantage* of this type of course is that it might not be as flexible as you had assumed. There may be rigidly imposed time limits on the production of work, or it might be that occasional direct contact teaching sessions (evening sessions or Saturday schools, for example) are a compulsory part of the course and yet do not fit into your work pattern easily. You might also feel isolated, aware that there are many other students on the course, but finding the contact that you have with them (perhaps via Internet study chat rooms) inadequate in making you feel that you are really part of a cohesive student group.

Remember, if you are on a course such as this, to make sure that you impose your own structure on your working patterns as early as possible and try to grasp all the support offered to you during the course, even if it takes some effort to find and make use of it.

Work-based courses

If your postgraduate course is intrinsically bound up with your professional life (for example a postgraduate qualification in a vocational subject), most of your studying may be a formalisation of your professional experience. You will be guided by your tutors and supervisor, but you might also be relying heavily on colleagues to support your work.

The *advantage* of this type of course is that you will feel as if you are gaining a recognised qualification as you go through your normal working life. You will be analysing and validating what you are already doing, which can make the transition into studying easier.

The *potential disadvantage* of this type of course is that your colleagues may be less understanding about the demands of the course than you had hoped, particularly if they have not undergone a similar course. You might also find it frustrating to be working on an academic level, yet not to be given the time to simply sit and contemplate the wider implications of what you are doing.

Remember, if you are on this type of course, you will need to ensure, well in advance if possible, that everyone whose help you will need is aware of exactly what the course entails, how much time you will need to complete it satisfactorily and the level of support that you may need.

As you can see, each type of course brings with it both advantages and potential disadvantages. In reality, many courses combine all the elements mentioned here, and you will work your way through the challenges of each whilst ensuring that you get the full benefit of every opportunity to advance. You will find that once you have understood and mastered the framework within which you are working, aspects of your course that once seemed confusing become much clearer. You will not be losing time worrying about the structure of your course and how that structure might impact upon your learning; instead you can get on with the tasks ahead of you with more confidence. Although it can seem daunting, it is possible to make the most of each element of your postgraduate course and so gain the advantages without losing out to any of the disadvantages. All that is required to begin this process is a determination to manage your postgraduate course, rather than simply letting it happen, and an awareness of what is involved and what is on offer. For you, reading this book is the first stage in that process.

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