

Guest editorial: Considering postgraduate study in languages, linguistics and area studies?

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Studying at postgraduate level?

Début showcases undergraduate scholarship in the fields of languages, linguistics and area studies and since you are reading this article you clearly have some interest in these areas but have you ever considered pursuing your interest at postgraduate level? You could study bilingualism, forensic linguistics, American history, interpreting, Russian cultural studies, contemporary China, Latin American literature, European media, holocaust studies, migration and exile, Islamic law, African politics, Korean literature, Hollywood, globalisation and many more subjects which are currently covered by postgraduate courses offered in UK universities. These courses and others in the field of languages, linguistics and area studies, provide exciting opportunities to deepen your existing knowledge and to develop your studies in new directions.

On a practical note, you may already have student loans and be concerned about taking on more debt and so you will reasonably ask what are the advantages that you will gain from studying for a Masters degree in the fields of languages, linguistics and area studies? You will be able to demonstrate specialist knowledge of your chosen subject. You will develop high level skills of analysis and critical evaluation as well as the ability to independently solve complex problems. You will gain experience in managing a large project in the form of your dissertation. In addition, these courses help you to develop advanced skills in intercultural awareness, communication, presentation and time management, all of which are much sought after by employers. If postgraduate study in languages, linguistics or area studies appeals to you the following paragraphs aim to help you to navigate the process of choosing and applying for a course.

Timing

In your final year at university it can be hard to juggle the demands of your course with the pressures of deciding what you want to do next but it is worthwhile taking some time to explore your options for postgraduate study. Although some universities accept applications for Masters courses as late as August for a course starting in September, there are important advantages to applying earlier in the year. In particular, the deadlines for applying for funding usually fall around Easter and you will need time to prepare funding applications. Ideally, you should aim to identify the course(s) you wish to apply for by December for a course starting the following September but if you are reading this later in the year don't despair, just start looking now!

Finding the right course – the practicalities

As you walk around your university you might start to notice posters advertising Masters courses and your institution might also email you details of the postgraduate courses they offer. Posters and emails can provide a good starting point but there are many other valuable sources of information available. Consider speaking to your personal tutor or dissertation supervisor about your options; most lecturers are happy to advise students about courses at their institution and many will also be able to recommend suitable courses elsewhere. The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies has information on its website about where and what you can study as well as links to relevant subject associations who may be able to assist you in finding a course or even funding (www.llas.ac.uk/keythemes/studentresources). Your university careers service can also advise you and direct you to valuable resources such as the Prospects website (www.prospects.ac.uk). You can search for postgraduate courses online, for example, via the Prospects website, using the postgraduate branch of UCAS, UKPASS, (www.ukpass.ac.uk/) or on findamasters.com.

When you search for your Masters degree you are likely to find that the name of the course is followed by the letters MA (Master of Arts), MSc (Master of Science), MRes (Master of Research) or MPhil (Master of Philosophy). Postgraduate study in the field of languages, linguistics or area studies could lead to any one of these qualifications. It is worth bearing in mind when choosing a course that if you are studying for an MSc your course is more likely to take a ‘scientific’ approach and involve, for example, statistical analysis or quantitative methods. MA qualifications are likely to be more essay based or adopt a qualitative approach. An MRes or MPhil requires you to complete a larger individual research project sometimes alongside a smaller taught component.

Once you have found a course you are interested in look at the course website and contact the department for more details about individual courses and modules. Consider attending an open day or arranging a visit to the department. Course co-ordinators are usually very happy to provide information and answer any questions you have, they can also help guide you through the application process and assist you in applying for funding. When making enquiries remember to ask if the institution has any funding available for Masters students and how you can apply for it.

Finding the right course - course content

Languages, linguistics and area studies offer wide ranging opportunities for postgraduate study and courses in these fields can be found in many different academic departments and so finding the right course for you requires careful research. There are several important issues to consider when researching postgraduate opportunities:

- do you want to continue studying the same subject that you studied at undergraduate level?
- do you want to maintain a broad focus (e.g. modern languages or American studies)?
- do you want to specialise in a particular period (e.g. nineteenth century), a particular country or area (e.g. Latin America or East Asia) or a particular part of your discipline (e.g. applied linguistics)?

- do you want to specialise in, for example, French film rather than French literature or history? If so, you may wish to expand your search to include media as well as French departments.
- are you interested in a particular theme, topic or theoretical approach which could be the focus of your Masters (e.g. postcolonialism)?
- which modules are on offer, are any compulsory and do they fit your interests and any plans that you may have for your dissertation? Check that any modules you are hoping to take will be offered in the year you will enrol.
- if you already have a dissertation topic in mind are there staff who specialise in this area? In this case, you could contact your potential supervisor to discuss your proposed course.

Remember, a Masters degree can be an excellent opportunity to change direction, not all courses require you to have studied the subject at undergraduate level. A few Masters courses even offer you the chance to learn a new language.

Funding

Some universities and departments have funding available and you can find out more from institutional websites, by contacting the university postgraduate admissions office or the department to which you are applying. Some research councils, such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), have limited funding for Masters courses in languages, linguistics and area studies. Applications to research councils are co-ordinated through the university to which you are applying so, again, you should speak to the postgraduate admissions tutor for your course and do so as soon as possible. It can be difficult to find funding for Masters degrees so you may need to be creative when thinking about how to fund your study; it is worthwhile asking whether the university has any part-time work which might be suitable and try to find out how current students have funded their course.

Top tips

- (1) Take time to explore all your options remembering that there are many different courses on offer in the fields of languages, linguistics and area studies and they are located across a range of academic departments
- (2) Find out as much as you can about the course and speak to as many people as possible. Do not be afraid to contact the academic staff who deliver the course to which you are considering applying to ask for more information and details of available funding
- (3) It's never too late to come back to postgraduate study. Even if you decide not to do a Masters degree immediately after your undergraduate degree you can always come back to do a Masters at a later stage.
- (4) Choose a course that you are really going to enjoy!