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## Why read this book? The target audience

### Chapter and book overview

This text is targeted at prospective postgraduates, current postgraduates and those interested in better understanding postgraduate study in UK universities and higher education colleges. In essence this guide provides:

- Detailed information relating to recent developments in postgraduate study, its numerous types and forms, and initiatives resourced and favoured by postgraduate funders.
- Summary information collected and collated from influential postgraduate funding organisations in relation to the desirable key skills of an effective postgraduate learner, with guidance on how to develop such skills.
- Guidance on where to apply for postgraduate study (from the thousands of courses and programmes of study available), how to effectively use Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) data, and other performance indicators, and how to obtain other institutional data to assist with institutional and programme/course selection.
- Focused and helpful information exploring postgraduate application processes and procedures, typical information requirements in postgraduate applications, and sample material from previous successful applications.
- Examples of postgraduate research/project proposals, structuring your ideas, and tips for successful proposals.
- Support on how to operate within a university environment, information on roles and responsibilities, and the structure and operation of the typical university.
- Guidance and support for dealing with and managing information and seeking advice, how to get the most out of libraries and electronic information sources.
- Advice on effective academic writing, drafting and structuring written work, and the different types and styles of writing for academic purposes.
- Effective assistance on managing postgraduate work, time management tools and techniques, setting clear goals, and utilising project management ideas.

- Information on how to work effectively with supervisors and postgraduate tutors, the typical roles and responsibilities of the student and the supervisor, and negotiating appropriate input from supervisors and tutors.
- Networking advice, how to develop postgraduate societies and support groups, how to gain the most from working with academics and effectively using conference as developmental events.
- Advice relating to teaching opportunities, how these can aid your research/project work, and add value to career progression.
- Detailed guidance and support in relation to getting work published, including selecting appropriate publication outlets.

### Postgraduates navigating their learning journey

Navigating a learning journey can be a demanding task. There are numerous guides and textbooks available to help support and steer your progress through higher education. Many of these focus upon specific elements or areas of your studies and/or learning; these include excellent expositions on the development of introductory level study skills (Drew and Bingham, 2001; Lashley and Best, 2001; Burns and Sinfield, 2003; McIlroy, 2003). For those engaged in postgraduate study, the above texts (and others like them) may prove useful but they do not unpack some of the unique peculiarities of the typical postgraduate experience. This text seeks to do just that.

In research work conducted whilst preparing this text, a wide range of postgraduates, past and present, were asked about their views, perceptions and experiences of postgraduate study. Short reviews of who they are and the postgraduate work they are involved in are provided in Appendix 1 (Postgraduate Views). Wherever possible direct and attributable quotations have been used throughout to facilitate the provision of more personalised accounts of the points or issues raised in the main body of the text. Occasionally, it has been necessary to preserve the anonymity of postgraduates (either at their own request or as an attempt to save their blushes). Where this is the case, names have been changed and the fictional universities of Northside, Southside, Westside and Eastside have been used.

Peter's personal account, below, presents a common theme for many when discussing their perceptions and experiences of postgraduate study – a need for tailored support and guidance that assists the postgraduate journey. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of generalist (and excellent) texts to support undergraduate study, but only recently have the specific needs of postgraduates been targeted and supported through the study guide literature.

*Effective postgraduate study demands focus and determination. Undergraduate study is fairly straightforward and structured - at postgraduate level there are far more pitfalls, dangers and potential areas for failure. You need to carefully plan and structure your studies with appropriate support from family, colleagues and fellow academics if you are going to (a) have any chance of success, and (b) an enjoyable experience!*

Peter, PhD student, University of Oxford.

This book has been developed and shaped around a typical postgraduate journey, beginning with an examination of what postgraduate study is, and what it requires from you as a student, through to contemplating and investigating career options post-completion of your studies. For this reason the text follows the format put forward in the Figure 1.1 – with indicative chapter issues outlined.

The structure of this text provides that each consecutive chapter develops and builds upon its predecessor. Following an examination of postgraduate learning (in Chapter 2), it is useful to look at the various training guidance material available, before exploring where you might study (in Chapter 3). Once the various options have been investigated, the application and funding process can be assessed, before submitting an application or proposal for research funding (in Chapter 4). In the remaining chapters, coverage is provided that assists postgraduate learners progress successfully through their programme of study and considers options post-graduation. Through this structure and associated analysis of key issues, it is hoped that the text provides useful support to the many postgraduates holding similar views to those put forward by Dan, a current postgraduate student, below.

*I think it would be useful for postgraduate textbooks to focus on the things that are going to get you through in the longer term - how to get published, what it's like to work in a university, etc. If you want to get into academia these are the kind of things you need to know.*

Dan, ESRC 1 + 3 student, University of Edinburgh.

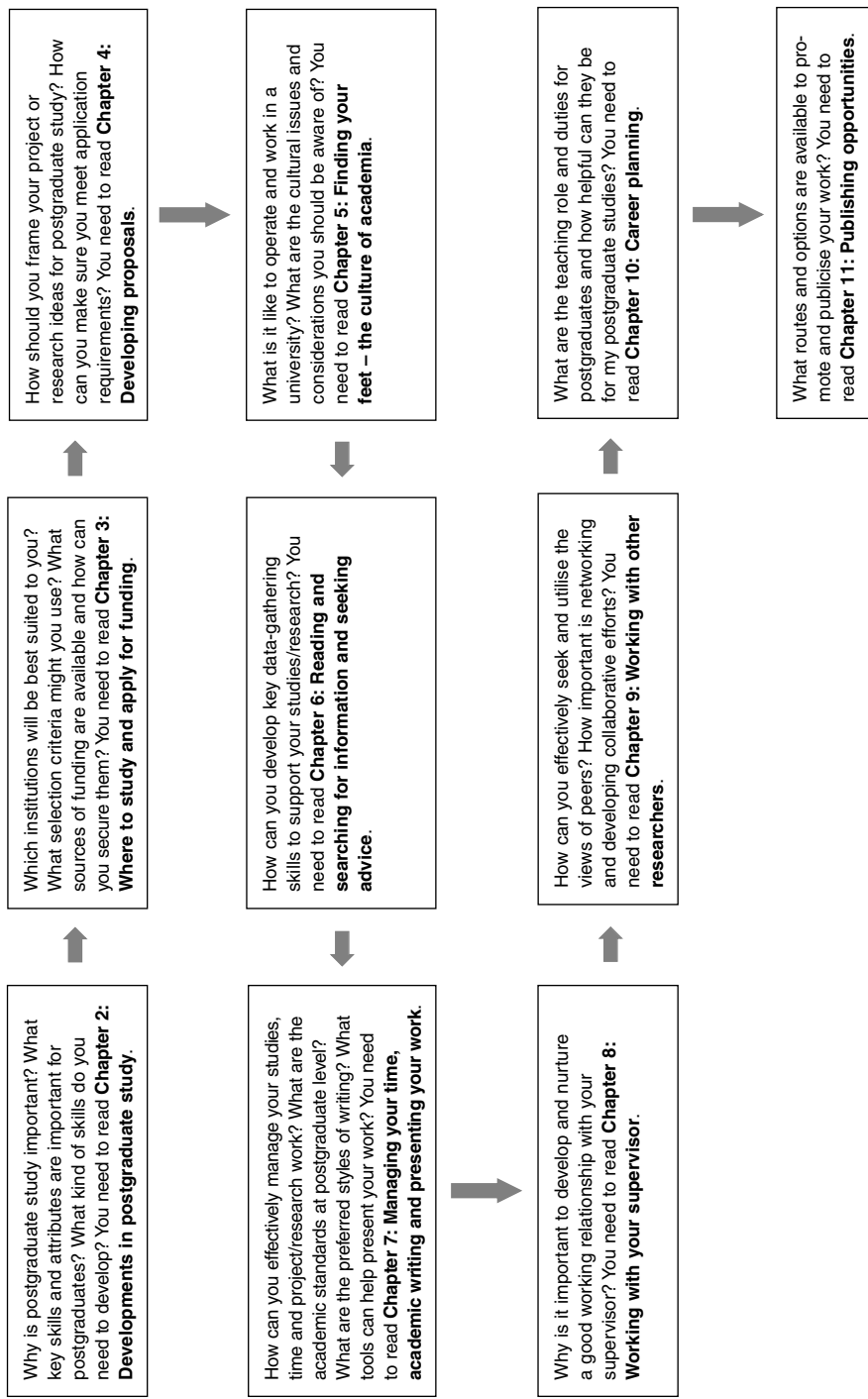


FIGURE 1.1 The structure of the rest of this book

In addressing postgraduate needs (as vocally indicated by a variety of postgraduate learners), the entire book methodically tackles the processes, procedures, issues, strategies and requirements of relevance to those wishing to navigate their own postgraduate journey. However, few learning journeys (particularly postgraduate ones) follow what could be described as a methodical and clearly structured path. For this reason (and to appease postgraduates such as Caroline below), the text has been developed for those at various stages in their postgraduate studies – for those who wish to ‘dip into’ or access specific sections to help resolve a problem or examine an issue of relevance to their own work.

*Many of the texts to support postgraduate study are quite good, but they do tend to suggest crisply clear models for applying for funding, working with your supervisor, and networking with fellow postgraduates. Reality doesn't always match this guidance. It's for that reason that I'm not really a fan of textbooks that tell you how to do things really. I'm a fan of the pick-and-mix approach - where you take bits from the books as necessary to serve the purpose.*

Caroline, PhD student, University of Westside.

If you are a prospective student, the book should support the personal research that you will need to undertake to identify which postgraduate programme meets your immediate and longer-term academic requirements. For new recruits, and for existing postgraduate students, the book offers an informed insight into the mysteries of the higher education (HE) system, the culture of academia and how best to work with academics and colleague researchers, and it covers practical issues such as academic norms, effective research, academic writing and time management. The book provides a firm foundation for students and sets the context for study at postgraduate level by providing useful information about the academic system that often students do not access until advanced in their studies. The overall aim of the book, therefore, is to enable students to become more strategic and less reactive in their approach to postgraduate learning. This shift in emphasis towards self-management not only involves a greater awareness of the need to develop ‘basic’ skills, such as time management and being able to set objectives, but also the realisation that learning itself is a skill that needs to be developed. In becoming more self-managed, students will, as emphasised in the book, develop a greater sensitivity of the importance of

thinking strategically about longer-term personal goals and career development. The coverage provided of Personal Development Plans (PDPs), an increasingly important area within higher education and beyond, will facilitate the effective assessment, development and coordination of your own personal and professional development.

A central issue for many postgraduate learners is the focused development of transferable skills from general study skills for postgraduates to skills in organising workloads, time management and effective methods of prioritising work so that deadlines are met. At key points in the text, references are made to developing key skills to enable effective collaboration with fellow postgraduates, as well as academic colleagues, enabling you to secure academic and professional success.

This book has been written to inform and support postgraduate students throughout their studies; it also takes the process further by giving advice to new researchers who wish to pursue a research career in higher education or in industry. Teaching and other employment options are covered towards the end of the text, and these should help students to think about the process of structured career planning post-qualification. Throughout, the book emphasises the need to think strategically about longer-term personal and career development.

### **Academic practitioners and policymakers**

This book is also intended to appeal to academic practitioners responsible for postgraduate teaching and research. For taught programmes recent expansion and rapid development of postgraduate provision has created a number of challenges, not least a perceived threat to the quality of postgraduate qualifications. Whilst I cannot pretend to provide solutions to all these challenges, it is important to explore how a 'student-focused' view can help to inform the future development of postgraduate provision. Faced with intensified international competition, quality becomes something more than a mantra reliant upon tradition. Quality relates to the entire student experience from initial enquiry to becoming an alumnus. The approach adopted in this book is primarily intended to provide a prospective student with the knowledge to make an informed choice about postgraduate study but in so doing it will hopefully set a benchmark for improving academic practice.

For those engaged in postgraduate supervision, a major external pressure in the recent past has been to improve completion rates on pain of losing government funding. An underlying theme of the book is to equip students with the skills to navigate through the postgraduate experience. Of necessity, this will create expectations and, for example, our discussion of working with your supervisor is designed to help academics as well as students to maximise the benefits of their relationship.

## Reference list and useful reading

- Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2003) *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university*. London: Sage.
- Drew, S. and Bingham, R. (2001) *The student skills guide*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Lashley, C. and Best, W. (2001) *12 steps to study success*. London: Continuum.
- McIlroy, D. (2003) *Studying at university: how to be a successful student*. London: Sage.