

The Life of a Masters Student

by Cameron Belton

From the outside, post-graduate life seems a funny one. Seemingly filling the void between undergraduates and academics, there is an element of uncertainty as to what life is like when aspiring towards an MA or MSc. Certainly, before I seriously began looking into the prospect of applying for a Master's programme, I had no real clue as to what I would be doing, and even after all my research and open days I still returned to UEA to enrol on the MSc Experimental Economics programme with a sense of trepidation. What I quickly learned, however, was that the coming year would be the most rewarding, interesting and (yes, at times) stressful that I have ever been through in academia. For those of you who have begun to look and apply, or those who haven't even given it a thought, I hope the following information will give you valuable insight into what life is like as a Master's student at UEA.



The Courses

Some of the courses UEA offers for the following academic year are as follows:

MSc Economics

MSc Experimental Economics

MSc Finance and Economics

MSc Industrial Economics

Graduate Diploma Economics

(The UEA Economics website offers a full list of programmes)

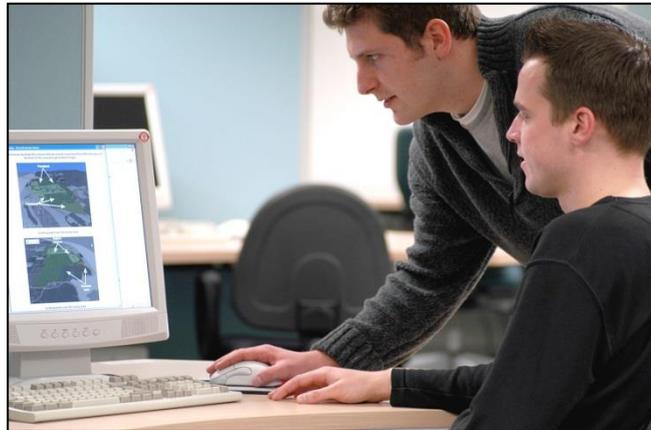
The most noticeable difference between the two types of programmes offered (MSc and Graduate Diploma) is that the MSc (or Masters of Science) is titled an 'Academic and Professional' programme, providing intensive research-led study. There is typically a stronger emphasis on mathematics and econometrics (statistics for economics), and the university website suggests this type of programme is more suited to those who wish to gain employment in a professional economist setting (such as in government or financial industry) or as a progression to PhD study. The standard entry requirement for these types of programmes are a 2:1 or above in Economics or a related subject. The Graduate Diploma programme, on the other hand, is better suited to those without an extensive economic background and can act as a platform to further postgraduate study.

The day-to-day running of the course itself is remarkably similar to that of an undergraduate degree. So much so, in fact, that my go-to description to friends who ask what the course is like is that it is "a normal

undergraduate year with a dissertation over the summer". I have studied six 20 credit modules split between the autumn and spring semesters, and my contact time is essentially the same. An average week involves 10-12 hours of lectures, seminars and tutorials in group sizes ranging from 5-50. The modules (worth 120 credits in total) have been a mix of coursework and exams (sat in the regular exam period in the summer semester) and I am currently completing my dissertation, worth 60 credits, taking the total Masters programme to 180 credits, completed from September to September. A Pass in a Masters is 50%, and a 70% will earn you a Distinction (some universities also award a Merit to those with 60%) and passing the dissertation, as well as all modules is a requirement for obtaining the qualification. Because the dissertation isn't completed until later August, graduation always takes place the following academic year (so despite finishing in a month or two my graduation will not be until July 2015).

What is the Work Load Like?

One common response I get from people when I tell them I'm studying for a Masters "there's no way I could do one!" I think there is probably a fear of the unknown, and the grandeur of a title of "postgrad" evokes ideas of being a library hermit, emerging bi-monthly only to sup real ale in the Grad bar before returning to try and uncover the mysteries of the universe.



However, the entry requirements exist for a reason. If you are capable of achieving a decent 2:1 or First at undergraduate level you will have the foundational knowledge to be successful at a Masters level. I personally felt the step up was not too dissimilar from second to third year. What often separates success from failure, however, is effort level, and there is little room to just coast by doing the bare minimum. There is a greater expectation on reading around the subject and often seminars will focus specifically around the additional reading. With just a handful of people in most seminars, free-riding off others is not possible it is painfully apparent if someone has not prepared for that week. Coursework is typically similar to undergraduate modules; this year I have given presentations, handed in essays, taken mid-semester course tests and sat computer tests. Whilst the content is naturally more complex, you find yourself working harder and you have years of academic experience of how best to tackle these types of assessments.

On top of these, more standard, assessments, the Masters programmes offer the opportunity to tackle different types of assignments. This year we have undertaken a team project taking enormous datasets from global organisations and created statistical models with them. It was gruelling but it was also fascinating, and a real insight into the roles of statisticians in both the professional and academic world. As part of my Experimental Economics modules I was able to design and run my own economics experiment, creating an experimental design, finding subjects and analysing the results, and it remains my proudest academic achievement to date. Most courses at UEA require a

pre-sessional maths and statistics course before the Masters begins in September, but this allows you to be re-introduced to the academic environment as well as meeting your new course-mates over the course of a fortnight.

Is It All Work and No Play?

Not necessarily. Whilst the course encourages you to work hard, of course there are opportunities to indulge in extra-curricular activities. The GSA (Graduate's Student Association) at UEA is free to all postgraduate students enrolled and offers a host of events such as weekly sports sessions (covering everything from running to volleyball) as well as social events such as quizzes, jazz nights or pub crawls. This year, though no formal society exists, the Economics postgraduate community has boomed and we are a close-knit group of friends. There are plenty of opportunities of socialising and I have made a number of great friends this year, from all over the world. Aside from studying I have worked part time and played for a university football team, so whilst you have to manage your time well, there is much more to the life of a postgraduate than sitting in the library.



How To Apply?

The application process is obviously a very important part of not only getting on any course, but getting on the right course. It is vital to think about what you want to get out of a programme, and where you want it to take you. For me, I graduated from UEA with a BSc and had an overwhelming feeling of wanting more. I had been fascinated by my introductions into behavioural and experimental economics and from there UEA was an obvious choice. The Centre for Behavioural and Experimental Social Sciences (CBESS) promised the opportunity to run my own experiments and the prestige of the academics spoke for itself (this too is the case for the Centre for Competition Policy and MSc Industrial Economics). A previous volume in this series (Volume 7- Beyond the BSc) provides a detailed insight into the application process for a Masters and I would implore anyone interested to read that useful article. There are scholarships and funding available but naturally these are competitive, so it is important to do your research and give the best account of yourself in the application process.

What Does It Teach You?

As well as the obvious learning of economics in greater depth and the problem solving skills I have developed, studying for a Masters has taught me many valuable things. For one, the style of learning is much more independent (though you develop closer relationships with your lecturers), and this style of independent research teaches you great analytical skills, deciding yourself what is and what isn't relevant or useful. The dissertation offers you the opportunity to contribute an original and significant piece of work to the academic literature, and that is a fantastic opportunity to showcase a piece of work that requires dedication and graft. When I think about typical competency based interview questions I've been asked in the past, there isn't any that I would not be able to offer an example based on what I've learnt as a Masters student. As a collective group of Economics postgraduates we have many going off into high-level graduate jobs, as well as others, like myself, progressing into PhD research. A Masters not only opens new doors but pushes you further along in a very competitive job market.

In between graduating with my BSc and starting towards my MSc I worked for a year, to decide if further study was really what I wanted to do. I decided it was and so I came back, passionate but a little bit daunted. Having help run a delicatessen for a year I knew the tasting notes of a good Chilean red wine, but I hadn't thought about IS-LM curves for a year, and I was unsure how I would cope with the return to education. However, I needn't have worried as I very quickly found myself back in a student mind-set. In our induction lecture, one lecturer told us "Masters students don't have fun, or sleep. They work." In many ways they are right. You absolutely immerse yourself in your study; you wake yourself up at night thinking about a solution to a problem or think about a new idea to a topic you're researching when out having a drink with your friends. And yet, if you're anything like me, you'll absolutely love this. This previous year has been the most enjoyable of my academic life and I urge everyone who has an interest in furthering their study to take a look at your options and see if they can find something right for you.

I wish you all the best of luck in whatever path you choose.

Cameron Belton