

POSTGRADUATE OPPORTUNITIES

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According to Mary Quirke, founder of Career Confidence (careerconfidence.ie), people choose postgraduate education for numerous reasons, but all of them are personal.

"A postgraduate qualification can be used to professionalise in a certain area, for example, teaching or areas of business," says Mary. "It can be used to change direction, for example, a conversion course. It can be used to access a career area that was inaccessible previously, such as medicine or physiotherapy. It can be used as part of a lifestyle change – if you wish to change 'how' you work. It can be in response to a life event like redundancy, illness or relocation, and it can be used to explore new options and learning."

Mary says a postgraduate course furthers your knowledge in the subject area you already have experience in.

"It can also introduce you to a new network of people by way of classmates and lecturers, new opportunities by way of work, and new ways of thinking about how you work by gaining new skills. This is attractive for any employer."

New direction

Mary previously worked as a nurse and midwife, having trained and worked in Cork for the first decade of her working life. For a number of reasons, she decided to engage in postgraduate training herself, to qualify as a guidance counsellor.

"I did a postgraduate course in UCC to change career direction and open up a whole new world of work," says Mary. "And I have never looked back! I enjoyed nursing, but as work was difficult to come by at the time and I had also sustained a back injury, I needed to change."

Mary started her career guidance business, Career Confidence over 15 years ago.

"At the time, I was working as an assistant director for a non-Governmental organisation (NGO) and had been approached to do some private guidance work. I decided to put a structure on it and developed Career Confidence. I love to work with people as they explore options and find something they enjoy – something that excites them."

Over the years, many of Mary's clients shared the challenges and worries they experienced when making career decisions. And this is what prompted her to do another postgraduate course, this time, a doctorate (PhD). Mary's PhD is focused on Career Guidance, Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning.

"I have continued to engage and learn, and am currently in the final stages of my PhD at the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin with Professor Conor McGuckin," says Mary. "Another postgraduate course!"

"The world of learning and work is changing and has changed so much over the years. The



challenges continue and we now make career decisions on many occasions across our learning and working lives. It's not just as we leave school! Education is continuous and there are so many postgraduate opportunities worth considering. I never looked back from doing a postgraduate course."

Economic and social benefits

Each year, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) releases its Graduate Outcomes Survey, which is performed nine months after graduation. It provides data on the early career progress of both taught and research postgraduates, and captures areas such as earnings and employment outcomes.

The HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey 2022 found that pursuing a postgraduate degree has both economic and social benefits for graduates.

Niall Kelly, Higher Education Authority, says, "There is undoubtedly a benefit to obtaining a postgraduate degree in terms of enhancing one's career prospects and earning potential. As well as the economic benefits, there are broader non-economic benefits to be had. For instance, in the case of Postgraduate Research students, a 2014 CFE Research report found that increased resilience was a reported benefit from those who completed their PhD.

"This cohort is also valuable in providing broader societal impact by developing highly skilled researchers to address global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Their importance to society is further outlined in an Academy of Finland survey referenced in the

Broader Outcomes chapter, which notes that postgraduate research graduates are skilled experts who 'influence how we interpret the surrounding world and affect decision-making, practice development and the development of new products and innovations, among other things.'

The data in the Graduate Outcomes Survey shows that 89.7pc of postgraduate taught graduates are in employment nine months after graduation. And of those who disclosed their salaries (two-thirds of respondents), 59pc of them earn more than €35,000 per annum. In comparison, 75.8pc of Undergraduate Honours Degree graduates are in employment nine months after graduation and, of those who disclosed their salaries (three-quarters of respondents), 33pc earn more than €35,000 per annum.

Options and opportunities

The quality of postgraduate education in Ireland can also be an appealing factor for prospective students. Ireland has one of the best education systems in the world and is ranked 5th among the countries with the highest education in the world.

The Higher Education Authority is actively involved in a number of initiatives related to postgraduate education in Ireland. It is a co-chair alongside QQI of the National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) Advisory Forum which provides a set of principles for doctoral education in Ireland. The Forum is made up of representatives from across Ireland's



Mary Quirke

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who are concerned with the quality of the postgraduate experience in Irish higher education.

Niall Kelly, HEA, says, "Ireland has a growing international reputation for developing highly skilled graduates. And the National Framework was developed in 2015 to underpin excellence in all forms of doctoral education in Ireland."

There is also a variety of postgraduate options across Ireland to suit various personal circumstances.

For example, at the Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS), there is a range of postgraduate programmes through

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Sean Lyons, TUS

full-time, part-time, online, blended and in-person modes. “There really is a course to suit everyone,” says Sean Lyons, Dean of Faculty of Engineering and Informatics at TUS. “You can gain new technical skills in areas like polymers, cybersecurity, data analytics or packaging, as well as increase your career prospects and management and leadership skills. There are options available over a variety of time frames and delivery methods to suit everyone’s needs.”

Sean says at TUS, students can expect programmes that are designed with the learner in mind. “The subject matter is informed by industry and cutting-edge research to ensure it is relevant, not just today, but long into the future. Students can expect to gain a qualification that is recognised worldwide and will enhance their professional opportunities, while connecting them with national and international expertise in their chosen subject matter area. Most importantly, they can expect to enjoy doing the course itself, as we pride



ourselves on creating a supportive, accessible environment with small class sizes and a real connection between the student and the faculty.”

Sean adds, “The world we live and work in is constantly evolving. A postgraduate degree can help people to gain new skills in emerging areas that help people build their careers, expand their opportunities and put them at the forefront of innovation.”

Check out tus.ie/study-with-us/postgrad for more information on studying at TUS.

Leading the way

The University of Limerick is another university helping students to progress their careers through their postgraduate offering.

For example, for those looking to advance their teaching career, there’s the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership / Diplóma Gairmiúil I gGeannaireacht Scoile. This Diploma is designed to prepare aspiring leaders with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and qualifications for senior school leadership positions.

It is a very successful programme of leadership development that is part-funded by the Department of Education. Participants will have the opportunity to deepen their understanding and apply the knowledge and skills acquired through situated learning experiences that provide opportunities to observe leadership in action. This is an excellent opportunity for primary and post-primary teachers to gain a Level 9 qualification in Leadership. The

programme is 18 months in duration, and is a part-time blended delivery learning programme – so it is designed to complement the very busy lives of teachers and school leaders.

The programme welcomes applications from leaders, middle leaders, and teachers who aspire to leadership in the future. Check out www.ul.ie/cpe/pdsl/node/1 for more information.

Progressing your career journey

Along with the career benefits, Mary Quirke of Career Confidence says another key benefit of a postgrad course can be the confidence it allows someone to build. “It provides that sense of knowing you have done it and enjoyed learning.”

Mary says, however, before you decide on a course, to first consider your journey to-date. “What do you need most from a postgrad course? How do you wish to engage? How will it work with your life at the moment? Why do you want to do it – what is your motivation?”

“Know yourself and consider what you expect and wish to gain. Talk to colleges and lecturers, and see what is involved. Plan, plan and plan.”

And when undertaking your studies, Mary recommends making use of the facilities available to you. “Over the course of your studies, get involved and avail of all the facilities in the college. Remember you are now a student of that college. Go to the library, careers office, and explore the clubs and societies. They all bring something new to your career and learning journey!”

Sean Lyons, TUS, advises to always follow your passion. “Choosing a postgrad course means that you should be really interested in the subject, as that will really ensure your success. You get out of a programme what you put in. So make sure you ask lots of questions and engage in class debates as much as possible so that you maximise your own learning.”