

## Is further study the 'least worst' choice?

With a bleak jobs market, further study can give graduates the edge. Warwick Mansell reports

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There are not many reasons to be cheerful if you are graduating this summer, as the economy reels from one gloomy set of statistics to another, and companies put the squeeze on recruitment. But Helen Arnold is looking on the bright side.

Having watched a succession of well-qualified friends growing disenchanted with knock-backs from employers over the past 12 months, she has decided to put off the jobs fight for a year in favour of postgraduate study. This, she believes, will leave her better qualified to enter the fiercely competitive world of publishing while also, perhaps, giving the economy time to pick up.

Helen, 23, has just finished a four-year course in Italian and saw many friends attempting to enter the jobs market last summer after three years at university. She says: "A lot of them have found it tough. One poor girl that I know got a graduate position last summer. Then when she got there, she found there was no job for her before she had started. She got another job, but was made redundant before Christmas. She has not been able to find another job since.

"I also know Cambridge and Oxford graduates with first-class degrees who have been let down by employers. It is hard." But she adds: "I'm actually quite grateful for the opportunity to reassess things now. People who graduated last year have spent their entire final year trying to fill out application forms, but then they have struggled in the jobs market. I've seen what has happened to them, and I've decided not to do that."

In opting to withdraw from the jobs fray for a year, Helen, who has just graduated from Bristol University with a 2:1, appears to be joining a growing throng of young people who are attempting to escape the worst of the downturn in the comparative shelter of academia or vocationally orientated study. Figures from the specialist student research agency OpinionpanelResearch suggest half of those students who finished their first degree last month are now seriously considering postgraduate qualifications.

Of the final-year students at universities across the UK whom the researchers interviewed in May, 24 per cent said they had applied for further study, with a further 12 per cent stating they were very likely to do so in the coming months, and another 14 per cent viewing this as quite likely.

There is also evidence that the recession is affecting many people's calculations. The pollsters, who interviewed



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*Studied approach: many graduates have decided to postpone their job search in favour of vocationally orientated or postgraduate study*

1,002 undergraduates, found 25 per cent of final-year students said the downturn made them more likely to go into postgraduate study, which was 7 percentage points higher than those saying it made them keener on trying to go directly into the jobs market.

The polling firm's findings are supported by anecdotal information from individual universities. One, Dundee, says that applications for taught postgraduate courses were 30 per cent up on this time last year. Other reports have suggested increases in applications ranging from 16 per cent at Birmingham to 87 per cent at Lincoln.

Figures from Ucas's Graduate Teacher Training Registry service suggest that postgraduate applications for teacher training – traditionally the second most popular subject for further study after business – are 20 per cent higher than last year. They come as undergraduate applications across all subjects are also rising: in March, they were up 8 per cent on 2008. Graduates, however, have to weigh up the possible benefits of further study against the extra cost of another year of living expenses, tuition costs and earning little money.

This may explain why the figures also show that younger students appear less keen on putting off entry to the jobs market. Among those undergraduates polled by Opinionpanel who had yet to enter their final two years at university, 16 per cent said they were less likely to want to go on to further study because of the recession, compared to only 11 per cent who believed they were more likely to do so. The pollsters say fear of more debt might explain this.

Helen Arnold will only be able to afford the Masters in modern Italian literature at University College, London, for which she has applied, if she lives with her parents in Kent and commutes.

Jennifer Shewan, 22, who is in the penultimate year of a six-year architecture course at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, says the need to start earning a salary means she will attempt to plunge straight into the jobs market next summer. Although Scottish students do not pay tuition fees, her overheads are building up and she says postgraduate options – a three-month diploma is all that would be on offer – are limited.

She says: "A lot of my friends who are graduating now are going into retail jobs, for example, or even on to Jobseeker's Allowance. For us, it's a very limited choice at the moment. It's a bit depressing."

Professor Ewart Keep, of Cardiff University, who is an expert on the links between education and employment, says: "Undergraduates with good first degrees may think they can ride out the worst of the recession by doing a postgraduate degree. This makes a certain amount of sense, provided the recession does not last too long.

"But that's the real problem. Unfortunately, the indications are that unemployment is going to keep rising for a while, even after growth in the economy starts to pick up. So things might not look much better in a year or so's time."

Another question is whether the universities will be able to support any extra increase in postgraduate applications. There may be some reason for optimism here. Recently, higher education has been able to absorb increasing numbers of postgrad students, who have swelled by 70 per cent in the past 11 years, according to a report this year. And Universities UK, which represents vice chancellors, says higher education may be able to respond positively to increased demand.

Rick Trainor, Universities UK's president, says: "The decision on whether to undertake advanced study rather than enter a difficult jobs market will be for the individual to decide. We believe, however, that gaining specialist, higher-level skills will give graduates an edge."

According to Keep, none of the options currently facing graduates is ideal. For some, further study might just be the "least worst" choice.

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