Is Graduate School Right For You?

Deciding whether to pursue a Master’s or Ph.D. degree can be a tough decision and one that can significantly affect a person’s life. Graduate School requires a large investment of both time and effort. When making this decision, it is important to consider many things such as:

- Do you have a clear understanding of why you are choosing to complete a graduate degree?
- Do you understand the pros and cons and how this degree can help you reach your career goals?
- Have you decided on how you will be paying for your education? Are you aware of any financial aid resources, such as scholarships and loans available to you?
- Do you have the stamina and discipline to commit to further, more advanced education following completion of your BSc.?
- Is this graduate school/program the right fit for you?

It is important for students to explore their options when considering completing a graduate degree. Answering some of the above questions is a great place to start.

Different Types of Graduate Programs

If you are interested in pursuing a post-graduate degree it is important to choose a course of study that best suits your learning style and interests.

Research-based Master’s Degree

This type of Master’s degree involves completing a research thesis that is based primarily on collecting and analyzing data with the goal of trying to publish your work in a peer reviewed research journal. Students conduct research under the guidance of a supervisor but also need to work quite independently. This degree will typically involve conducting your own research as well as being an undergraduate teaching assistant and completing graduate level courses. Upon submitting your thesis you likely will be required to present your research during a thesis defense. Completing this degree generally takes 2 years.

Course-based Master’s Degree

This type of Master’s degree will be focused around coursework. Depending on the program, a research or capstone project may be required. Completing this degree typically takes 1 or 2 years and may require additional work placements or internships which could extend the degree by an additional year.
**Ph.D. Degree**

A Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree is the highest level of education a student can achieve. It consists of completing a dissertation/thesis based on extensive original research in a chosen field. The majority of time is spent on research, though students will likely have some mandatory coursework and TA/teaching duties. Approximately halfway through this degree and after the student has completed any required coursework, the student will be required to complete a comprehensive exam. A comprehensive exam typically consists of a written or oral exam, or both, and it tests the student’s knowledge in their chosen field of study. Additionally the student will be required to submit a thesis which they will likely be required to present during a thesis defense. Admission into a Ph.D. program may require completion of a Master’s degree in a related field with significant research experience and strong academic success. More often, students can directly enter a Ph.D. program upon completion of an Honours Bachelor’s degree, or transfer to a doctoral program after completing one year in a Master’s program. The time to complete this degree can take between 4 – 6 years.

**What will I gain from Graduate School?**

Pursuing a graduate degree comes with many challenges but is ultimately very rewarding. In addition to gaining a great deal of scientific knowledge, you will:

- Learn how to problem solve and troubleshoot issues that arise
- Gain the ability to work both independently and as a team
- Collaborate with other scientists and researchers
- Have opportunities to travel and attend conferences
- Broaden your network
- Develop stronger communication skills through oral presentations and written publications

It is the student's responsibility to find a supervisor. In doing so there are several factors to consider such as, funding, research interests, project/subject areas of interest, location, preferred lab environment (small or large), working with new faculty member or a well-known/ faculty expert, mentorship style and prior record of mentorship.

Use all available resources to gain different perspectives on what life in graduate school is like. Speak with professors, current graduate students, and students who have recently completed their degree. This is valuable information!

If you drift into graduate school, especially a Ph.D. program, because you are uncertain of what to do after finishing your undergraduate degree, you may quickly get frustrated and be disappointed. However, if you show true enthusiasm for research and have a passion for scientific discovery then, no matter what challenges arise, your intrinsic motivation will allow you to persevere!