

Career Opportunities and Postgraduate Study in Social Policy

○ Employment Prospects and Opportunities

Studying Social Policy is stimulating and brings many life-long benefits. The financial investment entailed in pursuing a degree has nonetheless made it extremely important to be aware of the employment possibilities it produces. New graduates face a fast-changing, highly competitive, and often volatile labour market subject to both national and global influences. The message to Policy students, however, is that, provided they capitalize on their studies, they are well placed to meet these economic challenges.

Whatever the sector or service, effective policy evaluation is central to decision-making and organizational success. Consequently, there is a high demand for graduates who are:

- ❖ **are skilled in quantitative and qualitative policy analysis and appraisal;**
- ❖ **are aware of resource and implementation issues and the complexities of meeting varying stakeholder requirements; and**
- ❖ **possess a strong knowledge-base drawn from its interdisciplinary and international nature.**

This section of the web site provides an indication of the range of employment opportunities open to Social Policy graduates and those who study the discipline as part of other programmes. Exploring and evaluating these is itself a form of analysis that requires an understanding of the issues addressed in *The Companion* and raises many questions about the momentum, direction, and implications of current labour market developments. It should also help you identify the competences you will need to bring to the graduate labour market, how they might be best utilized in the recruitment and selection processes, and the main possibilities presented by postgraduate study.

Our focus is primarily on the UK graduate labour markets, although parallels can be drawn by those interested in working or furthering their studies elsewhere. In terms of the latter areas, however, additional consideration does need to be given to: the length of degree courses; the significance attached to postgraduate training; the often more vocational nature of higher education in other countries and the operation of their graduate labour markets. Our suggestions should be used in conjunction with the information provided by your institution and the advice of your tutors and careers service to help you make the most of the competitive edge acquired through your studies.

○ Successful Career Planning

In the current environment, competition for posts with the highest returns and development opportunities is often intense. This makes forward planning from the early stages of your academic programme absolutely essential. As careers advisors will tell you, this entails researching the opportunities available, building a profile of your strengths, and seeking to enhance them. The ability to market yourself and draw on any paid or voluntary work undertaken alongside or prior to your studies is also vital. The starting point, however, involves building on the insights gained through your studies to ensure that you are aware of:

- ❖ **the employment areas typically entered by Policy graduates;**
- ❖ **what employers in these areas are looking for and how the study of Social Policy meets their requirements; and**
- ❖ **the key features of labour markets in the United Kingdom and their operation.**

Some cognizance of all three elements can be drawn from reading graduate destination research as well as data provided by university and college degree providers. In the case of the former, the most frequently cited publication is the *Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey* (www.hesa.ac.uk). Collated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, it provides information on first-work (and further study) destinations of UK-domiciled students reached within six months of leaving HE. From 2012, additional career data from particular higher education institutions in England and Wales will be provided in *Key Information Sets* for undergraduate courses. Further material can also be gleaned from recruitment-agency analyses of labour markets and employers' recruitment and selection literature (much of which is now available online), and by talking with careers advisors.

Collectively, these sources indicate that employment prospects for Social Policy graduates are at least in line with those of graduates overall and that the discipline is the conduit to an increasingly wide range of careers. In job-search terms, these fall into two main employment pathways:

- ❖ **those where an understanding of Social Policy per se is of direct relevance and highly regarded by employers (described below as the 'Social Policy Career Pathway');** and
- ❖ **those where a greater emphasis is placed on the analytical skills provided by the discipline (described below as 'The Generalist Pathway').**

This distinction is, of course, fluid with considerable scope for movement between the two pathways; there are signs, however, that increasing numbers of Social Policy graduates are being recruited to positions where a premium is placed on their analytical skills.

○ **The Social Policy Career Pathway**

Traditionally, many Policy graduates have sought careers in public services, and a grounding in the discipline remains a first step to a career in social work and other caring professions. It has also become the gateway to a range of management, advisory, research, and administrative positions in local and national authorities. Salaries may not always match those in the private sector, but public-sector employment can bring considerable opportunities for training, fast career progression, benefits such as funded pensions and flexible employment conditions, as well as the satisfaction of working in socially worthwhile fields.

Until recently, this was an expanding area of employment, but, as should be clear from reading *The Companion*, it is undergoing a radical transformation with deep cuts in many services. As these feed through, they are bringing smaller, tougher, and uncertain markets for new graduates. Despite this reduction in established opportunities, the indications are that those with a Social Policy base still obtain a clear edge in gaining work in both direct and indirect service provision. Moreover, the restructuring is also bringing new openings in other sectors throughout the United Kingdom.

An important case in point is the increasing number of voluntary and community organizations who, since the millennium, have become significant players by taking on the delivery of public services. Pay rates are highly variable, but graduates in these settings report their work is rewarding, and all the indicators suggest employers place a particular premium on recruiting those with a working knowledge of the discipline. The many possibilities range from research, policy development, lobbying, marketing, fundraising, resource and project management to training, volunteer coordination, service delivery, community support, and advisory roles. Such posts are not confined to the larger organizations and can also be found in small social enterprise agencies. Developments in these areas and in service provision are also creating space for new micro-

enterprises, and though risky, this may be another option you may wish to consider or see as a longer-term goal.

The reconfiguring of public-sector provision has also led to a growth in commercial sector opportunities as well as an increased emphasis on user involvement and more consumer-oriented services. The latter has created additional employment possibilities in user-support services, consumer information and advice, and, more generally, procurement and commissioning, quality assurance, auditing, policy research and development, and general management. In the commercial sector, it has meant increased options not only in delivering care services but also in the growing number of firms managing occupational benefits and offering auditing, consultancy, research, and advice on the financial organization and structuring of local health and social care services. Graduate opportunities also exist in the increasing number of cross-sector partnerships and projects devoted to initiatives ranging from health promotion and well-being to community safety and local planning. You may also want to consider the possibility of applying for a management traineeship (these are offered in the public and voluntary sectors as well as the commercial sectors), though competition for the openings can be fierce.

To take stock of the many UK options, you will need to consider a variety of aspects of each position (including the description of job tasks, the person specification, required competencies, reward packages, and career trajectories). Across the sectors, the main fields you might find worth considering are summarized in the following alphabetical listing:

- ❖ **Adult care services**
- ❖ **Auditing**
- ❖ **Child-care, early years, and family services**
- ❖ **Community development**
- ❖ **Consultancy**
- ❖ **Corporate social responsibility**
- ❖ **Criminal justice services**
- ❖ **Debt management**
- ❖ **Diversity and human rights**
- ❖ **Economic development**
- ❖ **Education and training/lifelong learning**
- ❖ **Employment services**
- ❖ **Health services**
- ❖ **Housing**
- ❖ **Immigration services**
- ❖ **Income maintenance services**
- ❖ **Information and advice services**
- ❖ **International aid and development**
- ❖ **Legal services**
- ❖ **Leisure and sports services**
- ❖ **Planning and redevelopment**
- ❖ **Police**
- ❖ **Policy information and advice**
- ❖ **Procurement and commissioning**
- ❖ **Quality assurance**
- ❖ **Research and policy development**
- ❖ **Trading standards**
- ❖ **Youth justice services**
- ❖ **Youth services**

At an international level, employment can be found in a number of different agencies. Whilst this may require a proficiency in a second language, there is a demand for policy-informed graduates to work in both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in Europe as well as global organizations (as a starter, check out those cited in *Key Sources on EU and International Welfare Systems* on this web site). The work ranges from field services involving aid, development, employment, health, housing and the reduction in poverty to research, administrative support, fundraising, project management, procurement, and commissioning.

○ **The Generalist Pathway**

The wider recognition of the skills sets provided by Social Policy degrees has led to an expanding range of work opportunities in linked fields such as human-resource management (HRM), counselling, and public and customer relations, as well as others where the substance of the degree has a less direct bearing. Destination surveys suggest that the discipline's graduates have taken up posts (some following postgraduate qualifications) or gained traineeships in:

- ❖ **Advertising**
- ❖ **Business services**
- ❖ **Communication, digital, and media services**
- ❖ **Customer relations**
- ❖ **Events management**
- ❖ **Financial and professional services**
- ❖ **Hospitality, leisure, and tourism services**
- ❖ **HRM**
- ❖ **Legal services and the law**
- ❖ **Marketing, market research**
- ❖ **Policy analysis and development**
- ❖ **Project management**
- ❖ **Public relations**
- ❖ **Recruitment**
- ❖ **Research**
- ❖ **Retail services**

In these instances, in particular, demonstrating the skills you have acquired is of crucial importance, which in turn means having a very clear conception of what employers are seeking from applicants and knowing how to communicate them through the selection procedures.

○ **What are Employers of Graduates Looking For?**

Studying the headline requirements in adverts, the types of questions asked on application forms, in interviews and what is assessed in other selection procedures (e.g., psychometric testing and assessment centres), it is clear that employers are concerned with applicants' capabilities and disposition. This applies to those posts where the subject base has a bearing but even more so to the 'generalist' career pathway where the possession and class of a degree is taken as an indicator of attainment, and the prime emphasis is 'employability'. As it is used in selection literature, the term embraces a combination of 'hard' (or specialist) and 'soft' (or transferable) skills (see Box 1) together with particular personal attributes (Box 2) that employers see as contributing to effective workplace performance.

Box 1: Employability Skills Commonly Specified by Graduate Recruiters

- ❖ **Analytical, Evaluative, and Problem-Solving Skills**
- ❖ **CIT and Information Management Skills**
- ❖ **Commercial, Policy, Organizational, and Customer/User Awareness**
- ❖ **Communication, Presentation, and Multi-media skills (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, and written fluency, and the ability to deal with varied audiences)**
- ❖ **Inter-Personal Skills (e.g., team working, listening, facilitation, negotiation, management of others, networking, leadership)**
- ❖ **Numeracy/Data Interpretation Skills**
- ❖ **Project Management**
- ❖ **Research Skills**
- ❖ **Self-Management (e.g., time management, the ability to prioritize, to work to deadlines, to work independently and under pressure)**
- ❖ **Task Management and Organizational Skills**

The skills combinations and the required attributes will clearly vary with jobs, as will the priority that employers place on each category of qualities. But what is concerning the Government as well as employer- and student-representative bodies is graduate cognizance of these requirements and how students can map what they acquire through their studies against these employer expectations. To alert them, many universities and colleges now offer general skills-related courses within or alongside degree programmes, often with accreditation. More broadly, the National Union of Students and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (2011) have invested in further initiatives to raise awareness of what employers are seeking.

Box 2: Personal Qualities Commonly Specified by Graduate Recruiters

- ❖ **Capacity to Learn**
- ❖ **Critical/Strategic Thinker**
- ❖ **Culturally Sensitive**
- ❖ **Flexible/Adaptable**
- ❖ **Focused**
- ❖ **Highly Motivated**
- ❖ **Proactive**
- ❖ **Self-Aware**
- ❖ **Self-Starter**
- ❖ **Results-Oriented**

As Social Policy graduates, you should be able to map a broad range of competences including: analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills; the ability to undertake independent research; an aptitude for numerical and qualitative data analyses (and the use of the software and information-management tools this involves); the expertise to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions and their implications for organizations and service users, as well as self- and task- management proficiencies. Honing the personal qualities (listed above) is in part a product of confidence about possession of these skills but also a matter of self-development through your studies. Preparing

answers to the following questions (Box 3) should assist you in thinking about how you would present your skills and personal qualities in selection procedures.

Box 3: Sample Selection-Procedure Questions

- ❖ Describe three factors which you consider to be instrumental in shaping your choice of employment.
- ❖ What have you gained from your degree studies that have equipped you for this post?
- ❖ What skills and attributes make you a suitable candidate for this post?
- ❖ What led you to apply for this post?
- ❖ What do you consider to be the main challenges faced by this (organization/business/service)?
- ❖ Describe how you plan your work to meet targets and objectives.
- ❖ Describe a situation in which you worked as part of a group. What was your contribution?
- ❖ Think of a situation where you were part of a successful team. Describe your role in achieving the team's goals.
- ❖ Give an example of a situation when you developed effective working relationships with people of different backgrounds or views to accomplish an important task.
- ❖ Describe a situation where you met resistance to your opinion. What course of action did you take and what was the outcome?
- ❖ What positions of responsibility/leadership have you held? Describe your involvement and what you achieved.
- ❖ Describe a situation that you consider to be a good example of using your initiative. What did you do? Why?
- ❖ Describe a situation in which you successfully influenced others to complete a task the way you thought best. What was your role? How did you achieve the result you felt best?
- ❖ Give an example of when, as leader of a group, you set directions for them, gained their commitment, and led them to achieve the set target.
- ❖ Describe a challenging project that you had to undertake, how did you deal with it and to what effect?
- ❖ Describe a situation where you generated a new idea or process that led to improved results.

It should not be forgotten that many employers will also seek evidence that you have applied or enhanced your abilities through work-related experience. This is construed widely and includes unpaid or part-time employment, voluntary work, and participation in university or community activities. It is all too easy to underestimate or overlook these, and again you will find it helpful to regularly record examples against the profiles and questions in the Boxes and then gear your portfolio to particular organizational settings and job specifications.

○ Contexting Your Planning: The UK Graduate Labour Markets

As you will be aware from the preceding sections and, indeed, from your reading of *The Companion*, being attentive to labour market trends is an essential component of job searching and career planning. In spite of current economic uncertainties and amid the growth of a mass higher-education system, there are recognizable patterns of change not least of which is the continuing shift towards a knowledge-based economy and an expansion of higher-level occupations. Projections suggest that by 2017, over 50% of new jobs will require graduate-level qualifications (CBI, 2011) attracting

comparatively good remuneration and opportunities for further advancement. There will also be increasing demand for qualified students in small- and medium-sized enterprises and in areas of employment that traditionally relied on less qualified labour. On the supply side, however, it is clear that the growth in the number of graduates over the last two decades reinforced by the current Coalition Government's public sector spending cuts is leading to an extended and more complex shift into work resulting, in many instances, in the take up of 'starter posts'. These are generally of three types:

- ❖ **Entry-level posts offering the experiential base to progress to 'second step' positions with greater responsibility.**
- ❖ **Taster jobs, often on short-term contracts, taken to test the feasibility and appropriateness of one/more possible careers and where neither of these are possible.**
- ❖ **Interim work of a temporary, casual, or part-time nature. This is frequently in occupations stemming from earlier part-time or vacation work that may give access to promotion opportunities but generally affords time to 'shop around', firm up career interests, and pay off debts while applying for permanent positions, undertaking further study, or gaining experience. Increasingly, this also includes internships and their equivalents, paid and unpaid, in commercial, public, and voluntary organizations.**

What the presence of these transitional arrangements highlights is the need to be both realistic and adaptable in your choice of options and, where necessary, to make initial compromises in terms of what you are prepared to do and where you are willing to live. That flexibility should also include thinking through whether studying for an additional qualification prior to or alongside employment will open up further work possibilities.

○ **Postgraduate Study and Further Training Opportunities**

Postgraduate study can produce good returns on the time and money invested, but you do need to be clear about why you are following this path and check the options available, their relevance to your anticipated field(s) of employment, the admission criteria, and costs. In overall terms, you need to assess whether the extra skills and knowledge gained are likely to reap the sought rewards.

Bearing these checks in mind, the main postgraduate options are:

- ❖ **vocational courses leading to professional qualifications;**
- ❖ **conversion courses;**
- ❖ **taught academic courses leading to: a Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert), a Postgraduate Diploma (PG Dip) or a Master's Degree (MSc, MA, MBA, MPA); and**
- ❖ **research courses leading to an MRes, MPhil or PhD.**

Some of the careers pursued by Social Policy graduates, including social work and teaching in schools and colleges, require a professional qualification, while conversion courses enable you to work in related areas such as law or psychology. Postgraduate study is also increasingly a requirement for moving from 'starter' to 'second step' posts in many other fields. Career progression in HRM and marketing, for instance, hinges on gaining a professional qualification, and in other areas too, you may find it worthwhile extending your subject knowledge through a vocationally oriented course. These range from courses geared to particular areas of employment such as housing or health and well-being to those devoted to specific organizational settings such as the voluntary sector as well as more general programmes in management. Many institutions run courses that offer both professional accreditation and a Master's degree, and, for those with management experience, an MBA or MPA (Masters of Business/Public Administration).

You may, however, prefer the flexibility afforded by courses with less vocational immediacy. Here, too there are a host of programmes, enabling you to further your study of Social Policy or move into cognate areas. Taught courses are often offered on a credit-accumulation basis and in a variety of modes, institutionally, work- and web-based. They are typically completed over a year (full-time) or two years (part-time). Postgraduate study for a Masters by research involves undertaking an individual piece of research under supervision and also normally takes one year full-time (two years part-time). A PhD usually requires three to four years of full-time study in the United Kingdom (five plus on a part-time basis). It involves the submission of a thesis based on substantial independent research advancing current knowledge. It is widely expected that you complete a Masters before starting, and many students register for an MRes or MPhil initially, transferring to a PhD after their first year if their progress is deemed satisfactory.

○ **Where to Study and How to Apply**

These differing options are widely advertised in the press and on university and college web sites. Weighing them up and determining what and where to study should be based on advice from the careers service and, more particularly, your tutors. Unlike undergraduate study, the only centrally organized application schemes for postgraduate study are for teaching and social work, and in the case of the former you should ensure your studies meet the admissions criteria. For other programmes, applications have to be made directly to providers according to their specific time frames (which again can usually be checked on the appropriate web site).

Admissions tutors for vocational and taught Master's courses will want to assure themselves (through the application form, personal statement, and any subsequent interview) that you have the background, ability, and commitment to successfully pursue advanced study. For a PhD programme, selection depends on the quality of the research proposal and typically involves applying to undertake research either in a pre-designated area or on a freestanding project. In either instance, it is important to seek your tutors' advice and ensure in advance that they are willing to provide references supporting your submission.

○ **Sources of Funding for Postgraduate Study**

Though various forms of financial support are available, competition is intense, and many are confined to particular training schemes. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the different options and bidding for one or a mix of them. Full details will be held by your careers service, but the main sources (which vary between taught and research courses) are:

- ❖ **public funding: through Research Council Awards primarily for MPhil and PhD studies (applications for which should be made through the department at which you intend to study) and for teaching and social work;**
- ❖ **institutional funding: bursaries, scholarships, studentships, teaching and research assistantships (again bids should be sent directly to the institution concerned);**
- ❖ **employer support: the most comprehensive but most competitive are graduate traineeships, aimed at those with management potential. Many employers also provide assistance with fees, books or other costs and/or paid study leave;**
- ❖ **assistance from charities of varying amounts and based on differing criteria;**
- ❖ **loans, including career and professional development loans.**

○ **Studying, Working, and Volunteering in Other Countries and Time Out**

This guide has largely focused on the UK graduate labour markets, but of course it operates within a global marketplace, marked by the internationalization of higher education, pan-national

recruitment by multinationals, and short and longer-term cross-sectoral opportunities in many other countries. Research from graduate recruitment agencies and other bodies has highlighted the growing numbers gaining work-related experience or studying overseas, and there is some evidence that this and organized 'time out' or 'gap' periods can enhance graduate employability.

In the light of many employers' high valuation of international knowledge and awareness, these are possibilities worth exploring, and the study of social policy overseas is also worth considering. Commonly taught within broad-based social or political science departments, such courses offer numerous possibilities but are subject to varied application processes and stiff competition for funds. Linguistic skills permitting, the range of subject-related and general employment options is, if anything, even wider than in the United Kingdom. As with the latter, some occupational areas will also require additional professional qualifications.

○ **Capitalizing on Studying Social Policy: References and Further Sources of Information**

In considering your graduate options, your first port of call should be your institution's careers service; it can provide information and advice on the many employment, voluntary, and further study possibilities available in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. It can also help you with skills analyses, job searching, and selection procedures. Increasingly, however, careers services particularly at national level are relying on a 'blended' approach, with much advice and information provided through web portals. The key ones that you will find worth searching are listed below, along with some of the many commercial sites.

Further information on the career paths of Social Policy graduates can be found in the AGCAS guide 'Options with public administration/social policy', which you can access at:

www.prospects.ac.uk/options_public_administration_social_policy_career_areas.htm

You will also find it helpful to crosscheck your studies and skills development against the Social Policy and Administration Employability Profile, which you can also access from the preceding site.

There is a large literature on the notion of 'employability' and graduate employers' recruitment and selection practices. For job-seekers, however, the most useful insights and advice can be found in the CBI's many publications on the issue, some produced jointly with other bodies such as the National Union of Students (NUS) and Universities UK (UUK), particularly:

- ❖ CBI (2011) *Mapping the Route to Growth: rebalancing employment*, London: CBI (available at www.cbi.org.uk)
- ❖ CBI/NUS (2011) *Working Towards Your Future: making the most of your time in higher education*, London, CBI/NUS (available at www.cbi.org.uk).
- ❖ CBI/UUK (2009) *Future Fit: preparing graduates for the world of work* (available at www.cbi.org.uk).

UK-wide trends in the graduate labour market can be tracked through the surveys produced by HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency, www.hesa.ac.uk), HESCU (Higher Education Careers Service Unit, www.hescu.ac.uk), AGCAS (the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, www.agcas.org.uk), AGR (the Association of Graduate Recruiters, www.agr.org.uk), UKCES (the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, www.ukces.org.uk), Universities UK (www.universitiesuk.ac.uk), the Office for National Statistics (www.statistics.gov.uk), Income Data Services (www.incomesdata.co.uk), policy and business reporting in the media, and, for remuneration trends, the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) (www.ons.gov.uk).

Insights into graduates' labour market entry processes and early career development can be found in the research emerging from the longitudinal *Futuretrack* survey (www.futuretrack.ac.uk) which is following the experience of 2005/06 UCAS applicants on three or four-year degrees from application to the year after graduation (winter 2012).

Many of these can also be accessed through the Prospects web site (www.prospects.ac.uk), which provides the most comprehensive starting point for information and advice on employment and postgraduate opportunities and funding in the United Kingdom and other countries along with general career guidance. You can also gain insights into general career planning and skills analyses on this and other sites, such as the entry on graduate careers and postgraduate study at www.direct.gov.uk. If you have a particular need, the Usemyability project (www.usemyability.org) offers specialist advice on skills development and employability (which is of general value, too), and careers advice can also be found on the skill site at Disability Alliance (www.disabilityalliance.org.uk)

More detailed information on the labour market and general careers advice for England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (North and South) can be found at the following portals:

<https://nextstep.direct.gov.uk>
www.lgcareers.com
www.careers-scotland.org.uk
www.myworldofwork.co.uk
www.gowales.com
www.careerswales.com
www.gradireland.com

Recruitment methods tend to vary by and within sector and between organizations, with some relying on traditional methods such as press advertising or employment agencies, others job boards, social networks, and other media. You will need to research where the positions you are interested in are most likely to be placed, but for policy-related employment, www.guardian.co.uk/jobs provides a good starting point.

Information on UK and overseas postgraduate study can be found on the Prospects web site (which includes a wide-ranging course database) and at www.targetcourses.co.uk. Courses and PhD research opportunities are also widely advertised in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, specialist publications such as the THES and, for, the United Kingdom and beyond, web sites such as www.findamasters.com and www.findaphd.com (for the United Kingdom and Europe). *The Grants Register* (Palgrave Macmillan) provides a worldwide guide to postgraduate funding.

If you are interested in working abroad, the Prospects web site again offers advice along with country profiles, as does www.careerseurope.co.uk (which is normally available through your Careers Service).