

The right time to get a master's degree

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Nowadays students are found of enrolling for masters degree almost as soon as they complete their undergraduate degree but when is the right time? PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

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By Phionah Nassanga

There is an increase in the number of universities in the country, making it easy for one to acquire qualifications. And as such many young people are going for graduate studies soon after their undergraduate qualifications, and as with many issues, this, too, has its advantages and disadvantages.

Before Rosta Asimwe completed her undergraduate degree in Human Nutrition, she had applied for a Masters in Public Health Nutrition. "I worked on-and-off for five months with research organisations. That little experience motivated me to take my master's degree seriously. Previously, I was just going through the motions but then I became interested in research. Besides, the pay is good in research work."

The advantage of rushing into a postgraduate programme early is that you are still young and have the time to concentrate.

On the downside, you tend to continue in the same course you began at undergraduate level. Gaining work experience opens the mind to a variety of career choices.

The merits of growing your career first

Spending a few years in the work arena can help a person focus their career goals. Grace Kenganzi, who has a Bachelor's degree in Mass Communication, undertook a postgraduate in Media and Communications after working for more than three years in a media house.

“By that time, I was sure of the experience I wanted to attain – the kind that I could not get from my workplace. I had majored in public relations in my undergraduate course and since I worked for a media organisation, I had learnt on the job. I was more deliberate as I looked for a postgraduate course; I did not want just any media course because in the future, I want to branch into communication,” said Kenganzi.

Samuel Bakutana, the chief executive officer Inspired Leaders International, says by concentrating on growing a career, a person comes to terms with the real demands of the job world, instead of making up their mind based on what they are told in the lecture room.

“The working experience gives you a more mature perspective. By the time I went for my Master's in Leadership, I was already aware of the glaring gaps, the available opportunities and the needs of my future work. I approached the studies with a more mature, sober and committed attitude,” he says, adding: “A working background enables you relate with the programme content at a more real, practical and personal level because you have gone through the scenarios (or have examples to draw from) being presented in the course materials as you progressively apply the new or renewed learning.”

The financial question

When you are younger, chances of getting a scholarship are higher than if you are above 35 years. However, all is not bleak.

“There are specialised programmes, for example The Chevening Scholarship Programme, that only gives scholarships to people who have careers,” Kenganzi says, adding, “You can only know about them when you are working. If I studied my postgraduate much earlier, I would not have thought of studying abroad or applying for a scholarship.”

Generally, because a master's degree can be expensive and students may be uncertain about what they want to do with their lives, students should gain some real-world experience before beginning a master's degree programme.

Fitting into the labour market

Employers are comfortable employing someone who already has job experience because, from a purely financial perspective, training of new staff is expensive and may not pay off immediately. Kenganzi believes her work experience and her master's degree gives her an edge. “I know what I want and I will ask for it. I cannot just accept anything thrown my way.” Asiimwe is not so confident. “Getting a job will be quite tricky. In the Ugandan (labour) market, (work) experience is the password and I know those who have it have an advantage over me.”

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