

Academic vs professional MASTER'S DEGREES

Which one should you choose?

Navigating university applications is a Herculean task since plenty of factors, starting from location to financial aid opportunities to employment prospects, are at play while choosing the perfect institution. And when it comes to looking into a master's programme, another layer of complexity arises – whether to pursue an academic or a professional master's degree.

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Subtle differences exist between the two, and deciding which one to pursue ultimately boils down to your personal goals. Although the distinction varies from country to country, this article explores some of the general differences.

An academic master's programme is broader and sets the foundation for further study after undergrad or prepares for a career in academia. It can be of two types: taught and research-based.

Taught programmes are structured linearly, where courses progress with scheduled lectures and seminars. Much like an undergraduate degree, learning is instructor-led and students study independently. Furthermore, depending on the university, students may be allowed to personalise the curriculum by choosing from the offered courses.

On the other hand, classes in a research-based programme are less structured and there is a heavy focus on planning and conducting independent research. One or more extended projects have to be undertaken to complete the degree. Supervisors provide guidance and feedback, but most of the learning is self-directed. Such a programme is generally a stepping stone for doctoral research.

Tazreen Jahan Bari, a master's student of English Literature at McGill University in Canada, talked about her career aspirations, "I plan on going into

academia, which is why I have chosen this degree. It is research-based and it's split between one year of coursework and one year of research work. I basically wanted an excuse to keep studying what I love. For me, the next step would be to do my PhD. However, a master's degree in English is very versatile. I have people in my cohort who are planning on going into law, communications, social work, media, publishing, and many other fields".

Oftentimes, a research-based master's provides the opportunity to specialise within the field.

Redwan Rahmat, who pursued an MSc in Infection and Immunity at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and is currently enrolled in a PhD programme, shared, "The program provided a balanced approach, with approximately 80 percent of study time dedicated to independent research projects. I chose this programme as it aligned perfectly with my interests in the field of infectious diseases and my career aspirations in biomedical sciences. Graduates from this programme typically progress to further specialise in their chosen field through doctoral studies. The master's programme itself offers ample opportunities for specialisation within the field, allowing graduates to pursue their preferred areas of focus successfully".

A professional master's programme is meant for building careers in a specific field and usually offers a specialised path of study. It provides a direct entry to the field and often results in immediate employment after graduation.

Furthermore, it also provides early or mid-career professionals with the opportunity to expand their skillset or advance further in their domain.

With a focus on real-world applications, professional programmes focus on mandatory work placements or a capstone project, which is like a thesis but more applied in nature.

Nafis Khan, who recently completed an MS in Data Science, Computer Science Track from Texas A&M University, talked

about the structure of his programme, "The programme was entirely coursework based, research was not a requirement. However, I took a research-based capstone project and it's about to get published. The data science program was very flexible, allowing me to pick 6 of my 10 total classes. Some of them had final exams at the end and others were project-based. Typically, you want to get into a data profession with this programme. Most aim for data scientist or data analyst positions in the industry".

Sometimes, the capstone project is a collaboration with a real-world company, which is an invaluable addition to your resume to get a head start in the job market if you have little to no previous work experience or are someone looking to switch to a different field.

The cost of attendance is typically high due to the specialised or accelerated nature of the professional programmes and the availability of financial aid is also rare. If scholarship opportunities are available, they usually have very specific criteria, for example, being a professional with notable leadership experience.

For some people, choosing a particular type of master's programme may be a no-brainer. But if you are struggling to pinpoint what you want to do after completion of the degree, ask yourself: Am I fully set on a specialised role or am I open to different roles in a certain field? Do I want to continue working in the career I am currently in? Do I want to have the option of doctoral studies? Do I prefer a structured learning environment? Am I comfortable with long periods of independent research and writing? How much time am I willing to dedicate to my studies?

Choosing one type of master's programme over the other does not mean your future options have to become limited. You can still pursue a PhD and a career in academia with a professional degree, and you can still excel in the industry and climb corporate ladders if you complete a research-based master's. Often, the distinction between the types is blurred as programmes tend to have a unique blend of learning modes. While weighing your options, it is a good idea to explore the programme's career outcomes page or look up the programme's alumni on LinkedIn to get an insight into the different paths available upon graduation.

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