

## A Master's or Ph.D.: Which Is Right For You?

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**Below are thoughts on this matter from myself and other people. I have modified the original text to my philosophical standpoint for Canadian universities and provide links to the original web sites (if still there).**

### **Master's vs. Ph.D. Programs**

From; <http://www.graduateschooladmission.com/phd.php>

Should you go to graduate school for a master's or for a Ph.D.? What's the difference between the two, anyway?

A Ph.D. (doctor of philosophy degree, or doctorate) is a more advanced degree than a master's. It typically requires three years of graduate coursework, plus satisfactory performance on comprehensive exams and completion of a significant piece of original research. It often takes five or more years for a doctoral candidate to complete all of their degree requirements.

Anyone who earns a Ph.D. is justifiably proud. The degree is much more than an academic or professional credential. It represents acceptance into a community of scholars and researchers. Earning one requires enormous personal commitment and ongoing effort. Admission to, and success in, doctoral programs demands much more than just good grades and high test scores. Commitment to the field of study, an ability to think broadly and creatively, and competence in establishing and maintaining productive professional relationships are just some of the additional attributes expected of doctoral candidates.

Master's programs usually require two years of full-time study. Some are academically focused, and prepare students to go on to doctoral study. Others have a practical or professional focus, preparing students to advance in their careers. Some master's programs require a written thesis. Others require a 'capstone project' that demonstrates the student's ability to apply what he or she has learned in a practical setting.

If you're not sure about whether you want to apply to master's or doctoral programs, you should take the time to think more about what you want out of graduate school, and to research the different programs that interest you. As always, your goal should be to select the educational program that you are comfortable with, and that serves your unique interests, goals, and needs.

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Master's or Ph.D.: Which Is Right For You?

From; <http://www.gradschools.com/article-detail/masters-or-phd-89>

Just as there are many reasons people choose to go to graduate school, there are many options from which they may choose. If you have selected a field of study, you may be wondering whether you should get a master's degree or a doctoral degree. Here are some things to consider.

## TIME

A graduate degree requires a significant investment of time.

Master's degrees require less time than doctoral degrees. Typically a full time student can acquire a master's degree in about 2-3 years. A Ph.D. usually requires at least 4-5 years and many people take longer depending on other obligations.

## MONEY

The old adage 'time = money' was never so true as with graduate school.

Since a Ph.D. takes longer to complete, it also requires more money. (Not that a master's degree is cheap either!) The flip side to this is that a Ph.D. may yield a higher salary upon completion and is therefore worth the increased cost long term.

With both degrees, school costs money (tuition, fees, books, etc.). In addition, however, there is also a significant loss of money if the student is not working or is earning low wages through assistantships or part time employment. Many people find they must either live a Spartan lifestyle for many years, or they find themselves strapped with huge loans when they graduate.

## COMMITMENT

Graduate school takes work.

Most people are not going to argue with this. However, many students who drifted through college are surprised to find that graduate school requires a much larger commitment in terms of work and intellectual energy. Graduate schools are frequently very competitive. Students who are taking a full course load as well as teaching often find themselves overwhelmed. And of course, the many years of school required for a Ph.D. require perseverance on a scale above and beyond what undergraduates must contemplate. While graduate school requires more work, most students find the work enjoyable since it involves an area in which they are very interested.

## PROS AND CONS

So we know that graduate school requires time, money and commitment for both a master's and a Ph.D. So which should you choose?

If all you want is a raise, a Ph.D. is probably not the road to choose. If you love learning in and of itself, and you want to pursue a career as a research then the work required for a Ph.D. may be worthwhile. Master's degrees tend to be more career-oriented while Ph.D.'s tend to be more research oriented since they are preparing people for research-oriented careers.

A master's degree has some definite benefits in that it requires less time and money than a doctoral degree, but will still set you apart from the crowd who only have a bachelor's. That said you will be competing against others with masters degrees particularly if the position requires

one. Don't think that just because you have a masters a job will come to you. You still need to be competitive at the master or doctorate level. The master's degree can allow specialization within a field. The degree works especially well for those who have been working in a particular career for some time and hope to advance or gain new knowledge that will qualify them for a different position within their field.

A master's degree can also be an excellent method of changing careers. For those who have been in the workforce and found that their career or undergraduate education are not leading them in the direction they would like to go, a master's degree can allow them to start in a different direction by gaining new knowledge and skills.

However, there are things that a master's degree simply cannot do. For those who want to become scientists and professors, a Ph.D. is practically mandatory. Even for those few who can find teaching positions with only a master's, most schools want to see progress toward a Ph.D.

A Ph.D. can also be helpful outside the world of academia in today's increasingly competitive job market. Businesses are searching for extremely qualified people who have demonstrated intelligence, perseverance and the ability to learn. A Ph.D. can open doors.

One of the less tangible, though very important, aspects of getting a Ph.D. consists in the ideal of creating knowledge. Ph.D. work requires original research that contributes new information to the field of study. It is a creative pursuit. People interested in pursuing a Ph.D. should love their studies and be excited by the prospect of meaningful contribution.

Still not sure what to do?

To summarize, a Ph.D. may be worth it if you truly love your field, enjoy your studies, and want the benefits and prestige associated with the doctoral degree. If you are simply looking to change fields or gain a promotion or do not think you could maintain interest through at least five to six years of school, then a master's is probably a better choice.

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### **Choosing a Masters or a Ph.D. as Your First or Only Degree**

modified from James Thorpe

<http://web.ku.edu/~riverecology/jhthomepage/graduatestudentphilosophy.html>

Most students should: (i) first get a Masters degree; (ii) decide when the Masters is nearing completion whether a Ph.D. is appropriate for them; and (iii) determine whether they should then stay for their Ph.D. and work with me, shift to the lab of another KU professor, or transfer to another university. I will also be thinking about these same options as the student works through his/her graduate studies. There are at least five reasons for this recommendation.

The research interests of most students are usually fairly undeveloped following college and are strongly affected by which courses they had and whether they liked the professors. During

graduate school your interests will change somewhat and you may feel it is better for you to switch fields; this is much easier and less traumatic for everyone if you can take this step between the two degrees rather than leave mid-course.

The quality of your Ph.D. will likely be better if built on the general and/or specific experience you gained working on the Masters, and your job prospects will be based mostly on the quality of your Ph.D. During your Masters you will learn more about how to ask good, publishable research questions, and this will help with your Ph.D.

To get a job at the end of your graduate career, you need to start working hard when you enter the door. This means that you need to publish, get grants, and build a research personnel network. The publishing aspect of that is easier if you have created a publishable product early in your graduate program (i.e., from your Masters research) rather than waiting to finish the entire product toward the end of your Ph.D.

Getting a job in the environmental field is probably lowest at BA/BS level, greatest at the Masters level, and intermediate at the Ph.D., though the types of jobs will vary among the degrees. If you choose or need to stop mid-way in your graduate career, you have better job prospects if you have a Masters degree finished than if you are just A.B.D. (all but dissertation) in a Ph.D. program. This situation for job prospects is not necessarily true for all graduate programs, but there are many jobs for Masters level people in the environmental sciences.

The sad fact is that the student-mentor match is too often unsatisfactory or even bad. A “nice” advisor may prove to be in the wrong area for your changing interests, or he/she may not be as good as you originally thought. Furthermore, there are sometimes major personality clashes between students and their advisors. This professional relationship is closer than you will have experienced as an undergraduate and you need to find someone that you can respect at best or tolerate at worst. Again, if you need to switch advisors or even schools, it is much less traumatic after the Masters degree than mid-course in a Ph.D. program.

One potential negative in working on a Masters degree first is that it is likely to require extra time, especially if you switch advisors, research topics, or universities between degrees. This is not necessarily true (I finished both degrees in 4 years total, but I was really lucky in my research results, took some concentrated courses, and worked especially hard because I had almost no funding for the Ph.D.!). The likely difference is probably one extra year. Nonetheless, in the long term the extra year is well spent for your career, in my opinion, and should improve your chances of getting a better job if and when you finish a Ph.D.

I want to emphasize, however, that I will consider a student working directly on the Ph.D. degree from the B.S. in some circumstances. They must have had significant research experience at the undergraduate level or sufficient relevant work experience, and I must feel that they are sufficiently creative, hard-working, and knowledgeable of what they want to do for a career.