

## Introduction to University: Lecture Seven

### Graduate School

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You are just a semester and a month or two away from finishing your BA (Honours) or BSc (Honours), and you think you will apply to graduate school. After your Bachelor's, you have decided, you will do your Masters, if a good school will accept you into its program. You will do an MA (Master of Arts) or an MSc (Master of Science) or an MBA (Master of Business Administration) or an MFA (Master of Fine Arts). After that, if you wish and you qualify, you will do your PhD (Doctor of Philosophy).

You will apply to a graduate school early in the second semester of your fourth year if you wish to begin graduate studies in the coming September. Many programs have application deadlines as early as February, though some accept applications until April or May. Deadlines for some scholarship applications are even earlier than that, maybe as early as the preceding November.

Almost without exception, only students who have an *honours* bachelor's degree are likely to be accepted for graduate school in a discipline. (This is one difference between graduate schools and professional schools. Professional schools will consider applicants whose bachelor's is not an honours bachelor's degree. Vocational graduate programs (Women's Studies, policy studies, and the like), like professional schools, will consider students who do not have an honours degree).

Typically, a Master's programme is one year long (the full twelve months), though some schools have a two-year program. Programs differ school to school and among disciplines. But usually a Master's program consists of three or four half-credit courses first semester, three or four half-credit courses second semester, and a thesis or research paper submitted in July or August.

Although a Master's program might be officially one year long, few students actually complete a Master's in just a year. For most, it takes eighteen months or even two years. Be aware that universities do not typically fund students past twelve months. The trick to finishing on time or at least within eighteen months is to have a manageable thesis project and to work steadily on it as soon as one finishes one's course work. It is no good waiting for inspiration to strike. You should work on your thesis during the early summer months as though you were showing up for a nine-to-five job.

All the courses a student takes during the course-work phase of her Masters are in the discipline in which she is doing a Master's. That is, if you are studying for a Master's in geography, the six

or eight half-credits (or the thirty-six credit hours) you must earn will all be in geography; if you are studying for a Master's in philosophy, they will all be in philosophy.

Schools that have large graduate programmes are able to offer graduate courses separate from their regular, undergraduate courses. If you go to the University of Toronto to study philosophy, for instance, you will find yourself in courses for graduate students only. You will be in classes with between five and twenty other philosophy graduate students.

At most universities and in most disciplines, however, your graduate courses will run concurrently with upper-level undergraduate courses. You will be with only two or three other graduate students in a class of mainly undergraduate students. You might be the sole graduate student in the class. The Master's students in classes held concurrently with undergraduate courses will write more papers or longer papers than the undergraduates and be evaluated against higher standards.

A Master's thesis is to be between 40 and 80 pages. Some universities impose a strict maximum page limit, to make sure thesis writers don't bite off too much. A Master's thesis is written under the supervision of one, sometimes two, professors.

When you have completed your Master's thesis, you submit it to your supervisor. When your supervisor thinks it is good enough, she or he will forward copies to two other professors, one from your university and one from outside your university. Your supervisor and the two other professors become your thesis committee. You will have had some say (or at least a veto) on who is to be on your committee. All three evaluators must judge the thesis worthy for it to pass. One or another evaluator might request revisions before she passes it.

At some universities, students simply submit their Master's theses and then wait to hear from their supervisor what the other readers think. Most universities, though, have Master's candidates defend their theses. Thesis defences are often public, meaning anyone can attend.

A thesis defence usually begins with the candidate describing his or her work and his or her main conclusions. Then each examiner asks questions and engages the candidate in discussion. Often after the examiners are finished, audience members are invited to ask questions and engage the candidate in discussion. Then the committee retires to determine its verdict.

Rarely is a Master's thesis failed. This is because the supervisor or the outside examiner will not let a thesis go to defence unless she or he is fully satisfied it will pass.

The party a candidate's friends throw for her after she successfully defends her thesis is a marvel to behold!

Having successfully defended her thesis, the candidate is awarded the degree of Master of Arts by her university at its next convocation.

Doing a Master's is a very intense experience. Almost all of one's time is taken up by school, if one is doing it right. Success in a Master's programme takes a high level of maturity and

commitment, a level of maturity and commitment even higher than needed for success in a Bachelor's programme. This is especially true if you begin your Master's away from home for the first time. Yet for those who are mature and committed, the year doing a Master's can be one of the most wonderful and joyous times of their lives.

And then, perhaps, doctoral studies. A doctoral programme consists in something like (there are variations school to school and discipline to discipline) four half-credit graduate courses in the student's discipline, two half-credit graduate courses in another discipline, basic competence in reading a language other than English, comprehensive examinations or area examinations, and a doctoral thesis, usually between one- and two-hundred pages long. (Doctoral students in continental philosophy tend to write longer theses than do doctoral students in analytic philosophy.)

Doctoral programmes are, officially, four years in length. Most students, though, will take five or six years (or seven or eight) to complete their doctorate, although a rare speedy student will finish in fewer than four years.

People who have just earned a doctorate are invariably so scared of the real world outside the university that they immediately try to get hired as a professor somewhere.

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21 April 2024