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Postgraduate Qualifications: A Beginner's Guide



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So you've passed your FRCA, completed an audit cycle and even had a couple of letters and articles published; now you're looking for a new challenge. Anaesthetic trainees are all too aware of the competition for consultant jobs and the extra, non-clinical skills required in diverse areas before application to these posts. One of the ways this can be achieved is by studying for further postgraduate qualifications. A research post or Out-Of-Programme training (OOPT) may lead to an MD or PhD, but for the majority a distance or part-time diploma or MSc/MA may be a more realistic option, and provide an opportunity to study a new subject or gain further experience in your chosen speciality. Whilst not for the faint-hearted, the plethora of courses and qualifications available make this a viable option.

Diploma Vs Masters

There are a vast number of diplomas that an anaesthetic trainee can take. These range from the diplomas of specialist societies

such as the Diploma of Intensive Care Medicine (DICM) to courses in medical ethics or education. The main advantage of diplomas is that they are aimed at working professionals and the workload should be manageable in your spare or study time. The wide variety of diplomas allows almost anyone to find something that interests them and is relevant to their career plans. The courses involve varying amounts of taught modules and self-directed learning, although the proportions of each vary. They take one to two years to complete. Assessment is usually in the form of essays although some will also have a final exam. They do not usually involve writing a dissertation. The downside of a diploma is that although they show that you have taken time to study a subject in depth, they rarely score any extra points on short-listing forms and, while there may be choices and directions you can follow, there is no opportunity for additional research.

A masters degree is one step up from a diploma. These are only awarded by universities and often a diploma can be converted to a masters by the submission of a thesis of 20-30,000 words. There are taught or research-based courses that are usually done over one year (full time) to three years (part time). For short-listing purposes, a masters degree may confer more points than a bachelor degree or membership of a specialist society. A masters degree is not as highly rated as an MD or PhD but the fixed end point provides something to aim for.

What to study

There are a huge variety of diplomas and masters courses. The choice of program is obviously highly individual, and with many similar courses being offered by several institutions it can be a confusing choice. Non-clinical diplomas/masters are available in many subjects but those most commonly studied by anaesthetists are in the areas of medical education, medical ethics and medical law. Other masters available include medical management and medical humanities. Clinical diplomas include courses such as the Diploma in Peri-operative and Critical Care Echocardiography, diplomas in pain medicine and the DICM. The main requirement is that you are interested in the subject and prepared to put in the work to achieve your goal.

Choosing a Course

When choosing a course the first thing to do is to look at the modules and opportunities offered, because they can vary widely. If you wish to focus on one particular area make sure the course offers it. Find out how flexible the course is and how much you can tailor the course to your requirements. Many of these courses are inter-disciplinary so find out what proportion of the students come from non-clinical/clinical backgrounds, as this may change the focus of the course significantly. Speak to the course organiser and if possible some current students before signing up. Find out how organised the course is, for example whether teaching dates or subject matter may change at short notice. Although most courses cater for distant, part-time students, check the availability of online materials and reading lists. Courses with long reading lists of books that are held in a library 150 miles

from home may quickly become impossible. Another important factor is the accessibility of tutors. If you are struggling with an essay there is nothing worse than sending ever more frantic emails to a never-read inbox.

Where to study

The local university may be the easiest solution, particularly if there are day release courses available. If going further afield then consider the transport links and whether you can feasibly get there four to five times a year. You may need time off to travel as well as to study for the course itself, which must not impinge on your clinical work. A course that is totally online or distance learning may be more flexible, but the lack of face-to-face time with the tutors may be a disadvantage.

Finance

These courses are expensive and range from £1000/year for a diploma to £5000 for a masters for home students, and more for overseas students. Most students are self-funded with the help of their (diminishing) study leave budget but there may be some other sources of funding if you investigate. Sometimes the deanery will help fund certain courses at the local university. Other deaneries have bursaries, which can be awarded for post-graduate study, while still others will allocate a larger study leave budget for trainees doing a post-graduate qualification. Don't forget that courses away from home may require an overnight stay and travel expenses.

Some tips:

DO:

- Remember that the workload is considerable and you will probably need to study for about 6-8 hours a week.
- Speak to current students before choosing a course
- Expect the course to take most/all of your study leave time and possibly some annual leave
- Expect to be challenged

DON'T:

- Underestimate how much work is involved
- Leave essays to the last minute
- Study a subject you're not interested in simply for CV points

In summary, therefore, undertaking a further post-graduate qualification in a subject which interests you will allow you to broaden your horizons and aid your personal development; it will also require some considerable effort and expense on your part. Ensuring you take the time to choose a suitable course is imperative, so do your research well and you will reap the benefits. Good Luck!

CALLING ALL TRAINEES

'Your Welfare' Survey

The GAT committee is currently undertaking an online survey of all trainee members to assess the causes and consequences of stress during anaesthetic training. The results will help to guide our future work within the committee and will allow identification of problem areas within our training.

Traditionally, online surveys do not elicit a good response rate. If we do not hear from you, we cannot pull any meaningful results from this very important survey.

If you are a trainee registered with the AAGBI to receive emails, you will have received an email with a link. If you have already filled in this survey thank you. If not please take a couple of minutes to answer our questions and give us your comments.

<http://broom.limequery.com/index.php?sid=97937&lang=en>

Many thanks

GAT Committee



Association of Paediatric Anaesthetists of Great Britain & Ireland

4th National Linkman Meeting

City Hall, Cardiff

Tuesday 24th November 2009

All APAGBI Linkmen are eligible to attend, but we welcome the presence of all anaesthetists who have an interest in paediatric anaesthesia.

Topics to include:

- *Quality of care (Care Quality Commission, Child Protection and Quality Metrics)*
- *Guideline development and its impact on daily practice*
- *Medicines for Children Research Network*
- *An interactive session on management of the problematic paediatric airway in the non-specialist hospital*

Registration fee £150

Lunch and refreshments included

Application forms will be available from August 2009 to download via the APAGBI website: www.apagbi.org.uk

For further information, please contact: zackputtock@aagbi.org / 0207 631 8804