

# STAYING THE COURSE

Studying for a postgraduate project management qualification can be a great opportunity to develop the skills to take your career to the next level, as **MATT PACKER** finds out



**Managing your career so you achieve your goals can be difficult to get right, especially in the early stages, when the urge to express tireless dynamism and make oneself indispensable can be all-consuming. And although nothing can replace the knowledge and experience gained on the job, for many project managers, the opportunity to further hone their skills on postgraduate project management courses – either while still working or during a sabbatical – can, in the long run, offer that extra advantage in furthering their careers.**

Here, three leaders of postgraduate project management courses discuss how their offerings work and what guidance they provide – and two alumni explain how their postgraduate studies added an edge to their already successful careers.

## STRUCTURING TALENT

**Brian Cato MSc MRICS FHEA, senior lecturer, University of Greenwich, Department of the Built Environment**



Our department offers a range of postgraduate project management degrees with a mix of core courses and a choice of specialist options.

The degrees include a final dissertation, but the individual modules are assessed through written work and practical applications of the theory. The course content allows the student to build various key project management traits, with an emphasis on construction.

The Construction Project Management module focuses on theories and principles, and develops soft skills in areas such as teamwork, communication and negotiation. Its twin module, Applied Project Management, puts the student into typical construction scenarios, such as assessing project scope, resource allocation, adding value and

procurement, allowing the student to apply the soft skills. Other, more technical core modules are Development Economics and Planning, Delivering Sustainable Built Environment and Risk Management – all of which focus on hard skills.

Our relationship with major industry players who hire our alumni, such as Balfour Beatty, Laing O'Rourke, Transport for London (TfL) and Barratt Homes, provides students with opportunities to visit significant construction sites to watch project management in action, and see how soft and hard skills are used in challenging scenarios. That close relationship with contractors and consultants alike provides a balanced approach to project management, from conception to post-completion.

**Roger Gemmell, principal teaching fellow, Warwick Manufacturing Group, University of Warwick**



We avoid being specific about the application of project management in one, precise environment. Many postgraduate courses in the field relate to, say, construction or IT, but we treat

project management as a generic body of skills with wide application. However, students can choose to narrow down that broad coverage by choosing two or three option modules, which enable them to steer towards the area in which they intend to practise.

Half of the credits come from a main project, which must be of interest to a specific employer. Our goal ▶

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is that an employer will look at a student's projects and think: 'This candidate's in-depth grasp of this topic could be valuable to me.' The project's format is either library or primary research leading to a 20,000-word dissertation, then an oral examination to check their understanding of the relevant issues.

Various academics will put up project topics – some of which come with industrial partners attached – and students can compete for those. Alternatively, they can pick their own ideas. In either case, we will appoint a supervisor to guide the student's work and ensure that their research fulfils our criteria for relevance and value.

Given the current expansion in demand for project management capability, employers may not always be able to secure those with direct experience – but they can engage people who understand the principles and risks of project management, and they are the types of individuals that we aim to produce.



**Professor Andrew Edkins, The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management, University College London (UCL)**

Our postgraduate project management offering comes in the shape of four master's courses.

The main ones are Construction Economics and Management, Project and Enterprise Management, and Strategic Management of Projects. Then there's the outlier – Infrastructure Investment and Finance – which mainly addresses the financial structure around large projects, but features a small element of supporting project management content, too.

Our intellectual underpinning is the work of Peter WG Morris, who ranks 'understanding the management of projects' above the more process-driven concept of 'project management'. As a result, our outlook is intensely strategic. We produce people who understand the toolbox that any project manager will need to reach for in order to provide the most effective input.

At postgraduate level, we've seen a real rise in interest from women, and also from people with increasingly wide and eclectic academic backgrounds. As such, they're going on to a set of equally wide and eclectic destinations. Even if they explore built-environment examples during their time with us, they may do that purely to pick up the underlying principles, and then apply them to IT, finance or work in various government departments.

On Project and Enterprise Management, we get 10 or 15 trainees per year to develop specifically for TFL, because the firm wants to create its own project management approach. TFL recruits non-cognates who spend a year with us doing a fully sponsored MSc. Then they follow that up with two years of work training at TFL. Our other postgraduate students have gone on to firms such as Space, Mace and CBRE. 

**MATT PACKER** is a freelance writer and editor

## REINFORCING CAREERS



**Sophie Aldridge-Neil, project manager, infrastructure projects, Network Rail; MSc Project**

**and Enterprise Management, The Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management, UCL**  
My geography BA from the University of Leeds in 2006 led me to work at Natural England, and later the Environment Agency – fantastic places where you make a difference every day. Sadly though, thanks to the recession, pay freezes, job cuts and a lack of opportunity hit the environmental sector. I needed a change.

Project management offered significant career flexibility, numerous challenges and learning opportunities. Following gruelling assessment rounds, I was accepted onto Network Rail's Project and Enterprise Management MSc scheme at UCL. The firm provided the extra incentives of paying for my fees and accommodation, along with a guaranteed job at the end of the course, which I'm pleased to say I passed with distinction.

My work at Network Rail has included large projects such as the Great Western electrification, HS2 and Crewe Hub, as well as property, station and platform enhancements throughout the south-east. It continues to challenge me every day – but I know that the MSc has made a difference to how I perform. It gave me an overview of pertinent theory, legislation and real-life examples to help me shape best practice with confidence.

A master's is not for the faint-hearted. It will be much harder than you think – especially if you've had time out from study. But it will enhance the skills and tools you need to make real

improvements, personally and professionally. After seven years and a couple of promotions, I am still on the hunt for new knowledge, experiences and opportunities.



**Tasos Vezyridis, group research and strategy director, Land Securities;**

**MSc Programme and Project Management, Warwick Manufacturing Group, University of Warwick**

I graduated from the National Technical University of Athens in 2003 with a BSc/MEng in surveying engineering, and began my career working as an engineer in a residential property development firm. However, I was keen to keep learning while I worked, and enrolled onto Warwick Manufacturing Group's MSc. After graduating, I joined Barclays Capital as an analyst in its corporate real estate team. Although I was based in London, my team had a global remit and I was involved in a variety of large, cross-continental projects.

My experience of the MSc course – along with being part of Warwick's dynamic and international student community – gave me the required knowledge, skills and confidence to perform outstandingly in a global corporate environment.

After Barclays Capital, I continued my studies with an MBA at London Business School before joining Land Securities, the UK's largest real estate investment trust. I now lead the Land Securities research function, advising the board, executive committee and portfolio teams on trends in the UK property cycle and wider economy.