

The right application

Pondering a postgraduate qualification? *Africa Health* looks at where you should start and how you should prepare

Deciding on postgraduate study options is not just about choosing an institution, it is also about clearly defining where you want to go with your career and ensuring the course matches your needs. All courses differ, so don't be beguiled into thinking it is the institution or city you are choosing for the same course. Choose the course... then consider the location. 'I tell all our applicants that this is an absolutely full-time job for a year' says Allan Hildon, a lecturer in Primary Care and the Programme Lead for the Masters in Public Health programme at the University of Essex. 'You would be surprised how many think a Masters is a further degree and don't appreciate that the rigour is a significant step up'.

Hildon is conscious that the cost of training in the UK is high, and they must therefore spend careful time ensuring they only enrol students who can truly benefit. 'It is crucial that students plan ahead' he says. 'What do I want from this qualification? How will I use it? Where am I starting from? If from a clinical position, what is my current knowledge base? What kind of vocational training have I been through? How will I adapt to another educational system?' he lists the immediate priorities he wants all his students to have properly pondered before arriving at Essex. His University has even developed a special module (based around the Moodle platform) that all students can access once they have received a firm offer of a place to help them assess whether they are heading in the right direction. He also cites the website of the UK Council for International Student Affairs (www.ukcisa.org.uk) as being a valuable and interactive site which can help would-be students prepare for study.

And as for the application stage, he simply advises students to be original. 'I can recognise a cut and paste application from a mile off. You must take time to make the reader feel you really want to study at our institution, and be simple and honest. I much prefer someone who says 'I'm strong on X but would really like to develop Y' rather than someone who tries to claim they are good all round'.

We also spoke with Brigitte Rudram, Regional Manager for West Africa for the University of Nottingham. Based in Accra, she travels regularly to meet potential students. What advice would she proffer? She immediately echoes Hildon's point about really researching the institutions to choose which to make applications to.

'We are strong in the Faculty of Medicine and Health for instance and if you check you will see that we are currently attracting £41 million of research funds annually.'

She advises that it is key to apply early and apply direct, and if at all possible apply online. Scanned documentation is generally sufficient for a conditional offer, though original or verified documentation will be required later in the process. On the funding front she advises that all applicants need to be proactive. 'Generally you will need an offer for a course to apply for any scholarships, not the other way around'. And if applying for a scholarship she advises really careful study of its criteria and aims, and an appropriately tailored application.

On the visa front she warns that it is vital to be very organised. The process is well documented, but the financial requirements are the commonest cause of refusal. 'You'll need living costs of £800 per month for 9 months, plus first year tuition fees, and they have to be seen to be in a bank account for a period of 28 consecutive days'. Most universities have full instructions on their websites, and the advice is to be scrupulous in following the requirements as there can be little more frustrating than qualifying on all academic lines, receiving an offer, and then stumbling at the last hurdle because of a bureaucratic error!

Training abroad can be fun and stimulating, but it is not without its complexities, with a thick procedure book that needs to be carefully studied.

