

Studying for an MPA: the two year advantage

Many policy schools now offer an MPA or MPP in one year, but our LSE MPA remains two years. Why? **Dr Lloyd Gruber**, the Founding Dean of **LSE's Master of Public Administration** explains the advantages of studying our two year MPA programme.



We are extremely proud of our two year programme here at LSE. A one-year programme has its place but our second-year curriculum packs a powerful punch, delivering the depth of knowledge and skills your future employers will be looking for. As you weigh your options, I suggest you ask yourself three questions:

1. Will I learn deep 'producer' skills or superficial 'consumer' skills?

If your goal is to work alongside today's leading policy analysts and thinkers, one year may suffice. But if your goals are more *ambitious* – if you want to be one of the experts yourself – there is no shortcut.

A one-year programme can teach you how to understand the data analysis you might find in a technical report, say a regression table. That is a useful skill. However, the international organisations, businesses, NGO's, and public agencies which hire our students want *producers* of knowledge, not mere consumers.

After two years, our MPA graduates leave LSE knowing how to **select and design**, for themselves, the appropriate methods for gathering and analysing data. They know how datasets get used, or sometimes abused, and they can tell the difference between strong and weak policy arguments. They also appreciate the role of 'power politics' in the creation of new policies and institutions, as all reforms are at least partially political. **After two years, they can confidently apply all this knowledge to concrete, real-world problems.**

Our programme's additional year of study is what makes this possible. When employers recruit an MPA student who has trained for two years at LSE, they know they are hiring someone who can already think deeply about policy problems, someone who is already an expert, and *already* a producer of knowledge. In terms of attracting employers, the second year immediately **and** very

directly benefits our students. It doesn't end there. Once our graduates re-enter the workforce and begin applying their well-honed policy-producer skills, the whole world benefits as well. Talk about serving a public good!

2. Will I have a chance to dig deeper into the policy topics that most excite me?

Every student who enters our programme cares deeply about a particular policy issue. If you're reading this, you probably do too. Would a one-year programme encourage you to nurture these particular interests as at the same time you were acquiring general skills? Some students may not mind putting their policy passions on hold for twelve months but why wait? **Our MPA programme encourages students** to pursue their pet projects and commitments during, not just after, their course of study. While one-year programmes might offer occasional drop-in lectures by practitioners, **we integrate area-specific training directly into our curriculum**. Are you passionate about economic policy? Is international development your thing? Do you harbour a burning desire to reinvent the way governments, schools, or hospitals deliver services? In each case, we would offer you specialised training, proper (demanding) courses and the chance to write your own policy paper in the 'policy stream' of your choice. Our two-year curriculum accommodates that level of specialisation. A one-year degree cannot offer the same opportunities for refining your skills.

3. Will I have enough time to master the skills I'll be learning, or will the whole process feel rushed?

Training for us here at LSE involves case studies and skills workshops and classroom work. This is just the beginning, the foundation of equipping you with lifelong skills. The most important skill we teach is a '*meta*' skill, the ability to put one's new knowledge to good practical use. Mastering this last skill takes practice, and practice takes time.

Our two-year MPA students receive the time required to solidly develop their abilities. We help them crystalize their new skills by applying them to different types of policy problems, from the micro (organising a team for collective action) to the macro (solving climate change). By the time they graduate, our students will also have completed their intensively-practical **MPA Capstone project**. Collaborating in small teams, they will have spent 7 full months working for one of the world's leading governmental, NGO, IGO, or private sector/consultancy organisations. To cap it all off, they will have presented their recommendations in person, explaining why, on the basis of evidence they themselves may have collected, their clients would be better off pursuing certain policies and discarding others.

Our students will also have seen how other, more experienced practitioners approached similar problems and challenges. Our **Policy in Practice Seminars** are a weekly meeting-of-minds between some extraordinarily talented policy experts and our own experts-in-training. In the second year, as our students' training deepens, we help them write their own theoretically-informed, evidence-based policy papers, with LSE scholars providing guidance and support along the way.

So this is why I am such a strong proponent of two-year MPA programmes in general, and of ours in particular. Two years are a particularly good choice for students who aspire to **become their countries' leading policy-knowledge producers**, the experts whose deep understanding is valued and sought after by others. Two years are essential for students who want to integrate their policy interests and passions directly into their MPA studies rather than put them on hold until they graduate. And two years is the time it takes for students to practice and refine, and thus get closer to mastering the skills we are teaching them. By the time they graduate, **our two-year MPA students are sharper, smarter, and vastly more experienced than when they entered the programme**. They are also more employable – just one more reason why I believe we offer the best policy training programme in the world.



Dr Lloyd Gruber is the Founding Dean of the MPA Programme. He is an Assistant Professor in Political Economy of Development in the Department of International Development.



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