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Master's in Global Risk vs. Master's in International Relations

8 March, 2024

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A resident of a small town notices a change in their grocery bill. This new cost is the result of an unexpected weather event, a conflict at a border, and decisions made at a corporate headquarters thousands of miles away. That same resident marks a ballot that contributes to a candidate's win. The new leader's decisions will ripple back through this complex web of global interactions, potentially influencing everything from international trade policies to foreign aid — and even the very grocery prices that first signaled a change.

This interplay of local actions and global reactions highlights the interconnectedness of the modern world, a dynamic that lies at the heart of studies in global risk and international relations.

From individuals to organizations to nations, we are all affected by shifting alliances, economic fluctuations, cultural exchanges, and technological leaps. For some, this is daunting. For others, it's thrilling to track these movements. And for a dedicated few, following along is not enough. These budding leaders want to have a real impact on how world events unfold.

"Working in global risk is really rewarding for those who enjoy keeping up with the news, as staying informed becomes an integral part of your job," said Matthias Matthijs, associate professor of international political economy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

"Sometimes I catch myself engrossed in reading about Europe or China or similar topics and then it strikes me: this is my job," said Professor Matthijs, who is director of the school's Master of Arts in Global Risk. "Staying informed and being aware isn't just beneficial, it's a necessity in this fast-paced field."

There are a growing number of roles that call for strategic thinkers with a deep knowledge of world affairs. These professionals are adept at using data and analytical tools to make informed decisions about the future of an organization.

To get into these careers, many people consider pursuing a master's degree. Two popular options are a master's in global risk and a master's in international relations. Both degrees are gateways to making an impact on global affairs. However, they offer distinct curricula that lead to different career goals.

A degree in global risk focuses on predicting events on the world stage and developing strategic responses. By contrast, a degree in international relations examines the complex political, economic, and cultural relations between countries. If you're curious about the further distinctions between these programs and the career paths they lead to, this article offers a more detailed comparison.

A Globalized World Needs Global Risk Management

Organizations rely on experts who are capable of managing complex interregional relationships and understanding risks that stretch across continents and national boundaries — all while proactively addressing challenges before they turn into crises.

"The geopolitical climate has changed so much in the past decade that it's spurred companies to bring on people who can anticipate these changes and project how they might impact their clients or business operations," said Matthijs. "For example, nearly every major bank in New York City has recently established a dedicated geopolitical risk shop and is actively hiring."

Master's in International Relations	Master's in Global Risk
Provides a wide-ranging look at the interactions among states and international organizations.	Focuses on predicting, analyzing and managing risks in international relationships.
Builds foundational skills in research and statistics	Presents advanced approaches to statistical analysis and quantitative modeling.
Applies multidisciplinary insights from the social sciences and humanities.	Emphasizes using data-driven methods to understand and address challenges.
Equips professionals for roles in policy making, consultancy and negotiation.	Prepares students to lead risk management in a variety of international organizations.

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These graduate degrees equip students to work on the forefront of decision making in a rapidly changing, hyper connected world. However, a key distinction lies in their focus.

A global risk program — as the name implies — is centered on risk. Those who study it want to understand global uncertainties and help organizations prepare for the unknown.

International relations programs, on the other hand, offer a wider perspective. They examine the economics, politics, and history that shape the interactions between world regions.

Let's look closer at each master's degree.

What is a Master's in Global Risk?

A master's in global risk is a specialized degree program that provides in-depth expertise in analyzing, predicting, and managing uncertainty in an ever-changing, interconnected world.

How Risk Management Became Essential in an Interconnected World

Risk management as a distinct field traces back to the post-World War II era. Researchers and firms responded to a dramatically shifting world by establishing rigorous methods to analyze, evaluate, and mitigate events that could negatively impact markets and organizations.

Over the decades, risk managers have added value to organizations by identifying areas of vulnerability and responding with systematic processes. Global risk emerged as a distinctive area of study because events like the financial crisis of 2007–8 revealed how important it was to account for the highly interconnected nature of our international economic, business, social, and political systems.

Today, specialists in global risk garner multidisciplinary insights and employ analytical software tools to anticipate and investigate emerging challenges. Global risk managers may take on problems as varied as preparing a plan of action in the face of an economic shutdown, to assessing the likelihood of a cyber attack against a government agency, instituting processes for response when a natural disaster disrupts a supply chain.

What You'll Learn in a Global Risk Master's Program

Global risk curricula usually combine advanced mathematical and statistical principles with economic theories and systemic approaches to understanding risk. The coursework should cover areas such as economics and international trade, politics, international relations, and crisis management, in addition to teaching research methods and quantitative risk assessment.

Some programs go further by allowing students to focus their learning toward a specific area or region of interest — for example, JHU SAIS students are exposed to different types of risk in four key global regions so that they can build specialized expertise. SAIS students then work on capstone projects that give them the chance to focus on one specific region and complete analyses that can be added to their resumes and professional profiles.

A global risk graduate understands how to:

- **Apply statistical analysis to evaluate risk and uncertainty**
- **Identify potential challenges before they become urgent dangers**
- **Strategize relationships, resources and other factors to minimize the risk of a hazardous situations**
- **Model risks, predict outcomes, and determine the appropriate response**
- **Limit the consequences of dangers such as natural disasters, cyberattacks or viral outbreaks**
- **Establish decision-making frameworks for dynamic situations such as international conflict and popular protests**
- **Find connections between seemingly unrelated events using quantitative techniques**
- **Develop recommendations for future development and communicate these ideas persuasively**

Careers in Global Risk

Global risk careers tackle the world's most pressing challenges, from political instability to climate change and beyond. They require advanced analytical skills and expertise to mitigate threats and build resilience. This is a dynamic field that offers varied opportunities for strategists, analysts, and consultants who understand how the world works and have the tools to help safeguard it.

"Many jobs talk about 'thinking outside the box,' but global risk is an area that actually does it," said Matthijs. "This is not a career for those who want routine jobs with fixed tasks and annual cycles. This is a field that is constantly changing."

A master's in global risk provides students with knowledge and capabilities that are highly valuable to a variety of employers. Graduate education in this field cultivates analytical thinking and reasoning, complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and resilience, all of which rank as top career skills in 2025, according to the World Economic Forum.

Global Risk Management Job Titles

- **Consultant**
- **Risk Manager/Analyst**
- **Business Management Analyst**
- **Finance Consultant/Financial Manager**
- **Global Risk Management Director**
- **Research Analyst**

Employers are increasingly aware of the need for experts in this rapidly evolving discipline. In 2024, more than 380,000 job postings called for “global risk analysis” or “global risk management,” according to the labor data site Lightcast, while the average salary for global risk management during that time was $122,000/year.

Settings like federal agencies, private consultancies, insurance companies, multinational firms, and market research agencies require the contributions of risk experts. By applying the latest thinking in risk management, these professionals can guide coordinated responses to an unexpected disaster like the current pandemic, advising leaders on how to institute processes for global governance and achieve sustainable growth under uncertain conditions.

According to Alan Fusetto, director of Global Careers in the Johns Hopkins SAIS Europe, a Master of Arts in Global Risk can be a major advantage for capturing professional opportunities.

“Analytical, writing and languages capabilities are just some of the most important tools global risk students acquire throughout the program,” said Fusetto. “These skills are instrumental in landing a job and being successful in the political and globalized risk world.”

What is a Master’s in International Relations?

A master’s program in international relations provides an in-depth understanding of the ways that states and other political entities—such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and multinational corporations—interact with one another, encompassing trade, diplomacy, and conflict.

Foreign Policy Decisions Need a Cross-Disciplinary Approach

Established as a distinct field of study in the early 20th century, international relations draws on concepts from a variety of humanities and social sciences fields like political science, economics, philosophy, geography, and law.

Experts in this discipline perform research and develop theoretical perspectives with the potential to guide crucial foreign policy decisions and maintain peace. For example, Johns Hopkins University Assistant Professor Nina Hall co-authored a study that examined how digital technologies transformed the role that NGOs play in policy making and advocacy around the world by offering powerful new means to connect with supporters and gather feedback.

What You’ll Learn in an International Relations Master’s Program

Because an international relations program is multidisciplinary by nature, students in these degrees take a range of courses that provide a broad skill set.

A typical curriculum includes courses that lay a historical foundation, alongside courses that examine the current state of specific regions or groups.

In addition, students will learn how to apply political science and economics principles to real-world international scenarios. These courses offer practical insight into global dynamics and the policy-making process.

There may also be coursework that develops skills in leadership, communication, and negotiation.

An international relations curriculum might cover specific topics such as:

- **Foreign policy strategies**
- **Statistical analysis of market forces**
- **Negotiating international agreements**
- **Ethical concerns in global relationships**
- **How alliances are formed and dissolved**
- **Political systems in the developing world**
- **Dangers presented by nuclear proliferation**
- **The role of third-party mediation in defusing conflicts**
- **Enforcing human rights and preventing mass violence**
- **Systemic economic conditions affecting international trade**
- **The development and amendment of national constitutions**
- **Setting standards for energy production and environmental protections**

What Can You Do With a Master’s in International Relations?

As a discipline that engages with issues affecting all types of organizations, an international relations education can be valuable in a wide range of positions. Through a master’s degree program, professionals gain a background in theory and research that’s useful to form worldwide connections and solve problems on a global scale.

Graduates may progress into international relations careers in federal agencies, multinational corporations, think tanks, lobbying firms, or humanitarian nonprofits.

International Relations Job Titles

- **Diplomat**
- **Foreign Affairs Specialist**
- **Foreign Service Officer**
- **Intelligence Analyst**
- **International Lawyer**
- **International Marketing Specialist**
- **Lobbyist**

- **Management Consultant**
- **Nonprofit Program Manager**
- **Research Analyst**

In 2024, more than 61,500 job postings called for "international relations," according to the labor data site Lightcast, while the average salary for global risk management during that time was $80,300/year. The top industries for these positions include government agencies, hospitality, college and universities, medical services and healthcare, pharmaceuticals, and consulting.

About the Master of Arts in Global Risk (online)

In the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) MA in Global Risk (online) program, students gain a thorough grounding in quantitative and qualitative risk management tools, modeling and decision-making frameworks. Our cutting-edge curriculum focuses on the specialized knowledge and research skills to analyze complex situations, mitigate dangers and take on leadership roles.

Featuring a faculty of groundbreaking researchers and experienced leaders, the Johns Hopkins SAIS offers a supportive environment that encourages collaboration and ongoing improvement. Our students participate in two in-person residencies and have opportunities to expand their professional networks.

Johns Hopkins University is ranked #7 for best national university and #14 for best global universities, according to U.S. News & World Report. In addition, it has been named one of the best schools for international relations by Foreign Policy Magazine.

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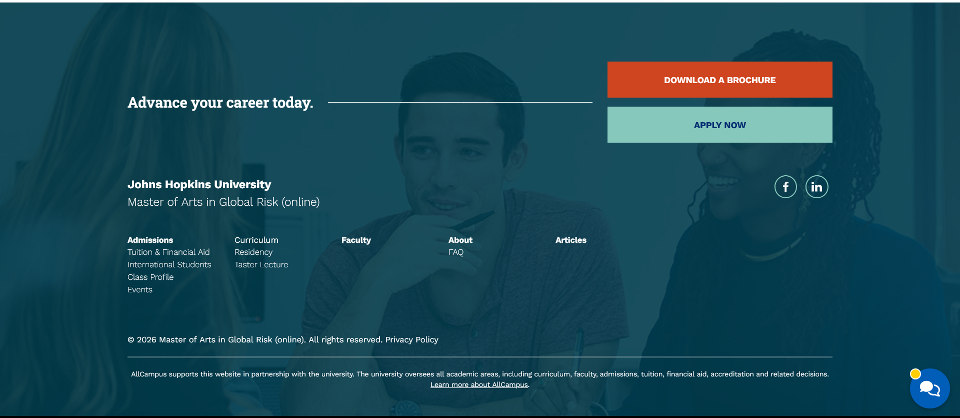

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