

Choosing a University

Every course and every university is different and each student wants different things.

The chances of finding a perfect match can be a challenge despite over 150 universities and university-level higher education colleges in the UK and the wide range of courses available. You will almost certainly need to decide what is most important to you.

- Do you want the best course or one that is quite good but offers the options you really want?
- Do you want the ideal work placement or the course with the least continuous assessment?
- It is all a matter of priorities which you feel are important for you, after all you will be the one who has to study on the course and you maybe living there for over three years or more.

So choosing the the right course at the right university for you will require some research.

- The more research you put into the process the more likely you will make the right decision. Doing your homework will pay-off.
- Once you have done all the reading, visiting and talking you can complete your UCAS application in the full knowledge that you have made a fully informed choice that you are happy with.
- It is good experience for life and future job applications.

This will then free you up to focus on your studies and ensure that you hit the grades which will actually get you to your univeristy and your course of choice.

Good luck!

So how do you go about choosing a university?

For some, the choice of subject and type of course will narrow down the number of possible universities to just a few.

- If you want to study veterinary science, there are less than ten places you can go in the UK.
- If you want to study Burmese, there is only one (it's SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies).
- For many, though, particularly if you are interested in one of the major subjects such as English, chemistry, law or mechanical engineering, there may be 30 or more similar courses so do your homework.

It is costly to change courses or change universities and difficult to break the news to your parents and friends.

- Research into the reasons why students leave universities early in the course often finds that choosing the wrong course was an important factor.

The Location

Where do you want to go?

- Do you really like your family or do you want to get as far away as possible?
- Do you want to visit your boyfriend or girlfriend every weekend (or, perhaps, want an excuse not to)?
- Do you want to find the cheapest way of going to university?

One way or another, location is likely to be an important factor. If you want to live at home, the decision might be straightforward. If you live in or near to London there could easily be half a dozen local universities to choose from. If you want to go away from home, then distance or travel time to and from home might be a factor.

Whether you go away to university or remain living at home either experience will be quite different.

- Going away to university may give you a greater sense of freedom than staying at home. Living away from your family and the town where you currently live may make your life less restrictive. You are free to choose.

- Relocating away from home means that you will be free to study and socialise as and when you like without having to worry about getting the last bus home.
- Moving away from home will almost certainly be more expensive. Have you discussed financial arrangements with your family. Are you able to get a part-time job?
- To happily live away from home will require you to be much more self-reliant, with a need to take responsibility for shopping and cooking for yourself maybe for the first time. Home does offer some emotional security and leaving home is a big decision. It is also a great way to mature and transition into adulthood.

Moving away from home may improve your graduate employability.

- Graduate employment research has evidenced that students who leave home develop self-sufficiency sooner and therefore have potentially better job prospects than those who stay with family.
- The family safety-net has gone and students, to be successful, will need to learn that laundry does not wash itself. These are excellent life-skills!
- These life skills of self-sufficiency are very transferrable into the workplace.

Some 'local' students choose to experience the best of both worlds.

- They choose a university 30 miles or less from home, live on campus in first year (experiencing university life to the full, making friends and networks) and then have the option of moving back home in subsequent years.
- Students who choose a sandwich course or placement year sometimes opt for placement jobs closer to home or vice versa to save money or experience living away from home.
- Courses involving a year abroad are available to all students whether they have lived at home or moved away.

Looking at a specific location.

If a particular town or city interests you, it is advisable to look at the geographical location of the university or universities you are interested in.

- Is the location city-centre or several miles outside?
- The former will be handy for amenities and night-life but may be noisier and less picturesque.
- The latter may be located in a beautiful setting but if you have to live off-campus there could be high travel costs and restricted access late on Sunday evenings.
- Don't forget that most larger UK cities have more than one university.

The town or city facilities might be a priority for you.

- Your time at university will be an opportunity for you to pursue your interests in a way you may never be able to again.
- Access to many things, such as sports facilities could be very cheap and you will probably have some time to become seriously involved if you wish.
- Whether you like to dance the night away, follow the Premier League or haunt the theatre, or engage in volunteering choosing the right location will help to fulfill your dreams and aspirations.

Bear in mind that the prospectuses frequently boast about the attractive surrounding countryside, but unless you have a particular interest that takes you there, such as climbing or fell walking, it is doubtful if you will spend much time taking in the sights.

- Our [university profiles](#) describe each university's location and locale.
- The [city profiles](#) give an indication of the sporting and cultural opportunities available, together with notes on pubs, clubs and shopping facilities.

The cost of living

Then, of course, there is the cost.

- Generally, the south of England and London are more expensive places to live than the rest of the UK so if cost is significant for you do take this into account.
 - A student rail or coach card could be a very sensible long-term investment and can make a great Christmas present from your granny.
 - Read about the [financial support](#) available to students;
 - advice on [managing your money](#) while at University;
 - and [student accommodation](#).
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What Sort of University Do You Want To Go To?

As you might expect universities are not all the same.

- At one extreme is an ancient collegiate university, a world leader in research and offering traditional academic courses, with most students achieving AAA or better at A level, large numbers of postgraduates and many overseas students.
- At the other extreme is a very locally-orientated university which does little research and offers more vocational courses to a higher percentage of students from the local area, many of whom are mature (over 21 years) and do not have A levels.

Both universities may be very good at what they do.

- Each university-type will offer a different student experience.
- Think about what is right for you.

Old or new university.

Generally, older universities will do more research, recruit a higher proportion of school leavers and offer more traditional academic courses. Newer universities will be more locally and vocationally-orientated and recruit more mature and part-time students.

- If you are interested in what is an old university and a new one, find out when the institution became a university or gained its Royal Charter
- New universities gained university status (changing from polytechnics) in 1992.
- Institutions who gained university status before 1992 are classed as "old" universities – they were founded between 1200 and the late 1960s.
- Don't always assume that having a crest or old style logo means old university and vice versa.
- Old universities sometimes have modern outlooks and fresh logos to reflect this, while some new universities want to create a sense of history.

The right course for you is a greater priority than the age of the establishment.

Large or small university

Universities also vary greatly in size, from fewer than 2,000 students to over 30,000.

- A small university might be perceived to be more personal and cosier with more facilities to go around; it may have slightly fewer facilities and non-academic activities.
- A big university will be busier and may feel more impersonal (lectures can be delivered to hundreds of students at a time).
- There may be a lot more activities taking place.

Student numbers are only a guide to where a university sits on this spectrum.

- Some large universities are divided into colleges, creating a small university feel within a big university context;
- others are located on several relatively small sites in city locations therefore possessing all the advantages of a big university.

[Look at the top universities for student satisfaction.](#)

[University profiles](#) include a brief history of each institution and give an indication of student numbers.

Quality and Reputation

Most people would like to go to the "best" university that they can get into.

- This is where the [League Table](#) rankings are helpful.
- By bringing together a variety of measures the League Table rankings try to give a reasonable and independent basis for deciding how good a university or a subject within a university really is.
- Differences of a few places in the table are insignificant, but a university in the top ten is doing a lot better in most or all of the variables than one in the bottom ten or even in the middle.

The [Subject Tables](#) rank universities on the basis of their research quality, the entry standards of their new students and how successful their graduates are at finding work or further study.

83% of students at UK Universities are satisfied with the quality of their degree course.

National Student Survey 2013

The main university [League Table](#) uses a wider range of measures of quality

(not all are available at subject level) and ranks the quality of the entire university.

- It is clear from the Subject Tables that even the best universities vary in quality across subjects.
- Some universities perform consistently well and appear in the top 20 of many subject tables while others come low down in the main table but have one or two very good departments that do well in the subject tables.
- So it is important to look at the main League Table alongside the Subject Tables.

Teaching quality is measured using the outcomes of the National Student Survey.

- This is an annual survey of final-year students asking about their experiences as a student.
- It is not a direct measure of quality rather it indicates how satisfied students were with the experience they had.
- As with all satisfaction surveys, it can be influenced by expectations: a student who expects to get a very good experience from a top-quality university may rate it lower than a student who was surprised by the experience they received at a less well-respected university.
- This level of subjectivity ought to be taken into account when looking at the results.

As ever, quality comes at a price.

An Oxford degree 'costs' more than other universities, though in this case the currency is examination results rather than cash (though see also the section on Cost).

- Look at the entry standards column in the League Table ranking and you will see that it follows the overall ranking fairly closely.
- In other words, universities higher in the league tables will, in general, ask for higher grades than those lower down the table.

Your results.

You will need to make a judgement about how well you are going to do in your school or college examinations and choose universities where you have a realistic chance of meeting the entry requirements.

- If you are taking A levels and are predicted to achieve AAA you may have more choices available to you.
- If you are being predicted CCC these grades may well exclude you from most of the universities near the top of the table.

This does not mean it is not worth applying.

UK Universities from top to bottom of the league tables have rigorous quality assurance policies put in place in part by the UK Government.

- Top universities for entry standards
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The Facilities

The facilities offered by universities are fairly similar to one another.

All will have a library, a sports centre, a health service, a careers service and so on. If there is something that is particularly important for you it is worth checking it out before you apply. Create a spreadsheet with a list of key facilities to build your own university facilities checklist.

Accommodation will be important if you are going away from home.

- Is there an accommodation guarantee for first-year students? What about later years?
- If you are an avid on-line gamer you will want to know if the rooms have broadband or wireless access and whether there is a cost attached.
- If you are often out late socialising you may want to know where the accommodation is located so you and your family can be reassured that you can return home late at night and you will feel safe doing so.
- If you are unable to live in university accommodation for the duration of your course find out where the private accommodation is located – check out the surrounding amenities e.g. shops, nightclubs and the laundrette. Will you feel safe there late at night?

If you have a particular minority interest you would like to follow while at university, then this could be a decision-making factor.

- Most universities will have sports pitches and clubs, societies and students' unions.
- Climbing walls and an Ultimate Frisbee society may be harder to find.
- The students' union will be able to tell you about sport and leisure facilities.

Students' Unions (sometimes called Students' Guilds or Students' Associations) have always been an important aspect of student life.

- They have evolved from the traditional image of providers of cheap beer and student protests.
- The modern entrepreneurial union will have a wide range of services from food and stationery outlets through to comprehensive advice services.
- Increasingly they are providers of part-time employment for students and are becoming involved in personal skills development.
- Inevitably some are more active and innovative than others, so they are worth exploring further.
- Our [University Profiles](#) give a summary of each university's Students' Union.

Over the years as the financial position of students has worsened universities have responded by setting up employment agencies or Job Shops.

- These are generally located in the careers services or Students' Union buildings. The agencies use their contacts with employers to help to identify suitable employment opportunities.
- The agencies will also help to ensure that rates of pay and hours of work are reasonable and within statutory guidelines.
- If you think you may become short of cash, a good employment agency of this type could be vital to your financial stability.
- Do take a look at the individual [University Profiles](#) for information on the availability of part-time work.

If you have any special needs, do take the time to ensure that your needs will be catered for by the universities that you are applying to.

- All universities will have a comprehensive understanding of the Disability and Equality Act 2010 and its legislative requirements.
- Some universities with newer buildings make accessibility much easier while others that have older buildings might make accessibility more challenging.
- If in doubt have the confidence to ask.

Be sure you find the institution that you feel will support you to have the best student experience possible.

The Cost

Cost has always been a factor in the decision-making process.

- Since 2012 entry English universities have been granted permission by the UK Government to charge tuition fees of up to £9,000 per academic year. This maximum fee is still in place for 2015 entry.
- Welsh and Scottish universities are also able to charge English students up to £9,000 per academic year.
- Most English students applying to English universities will be subject to tuition fees.
- Different arrangements are applicable across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For the minority of students moving from one country in the UK to another there is a more complex arrangement.
- Read [University Tuition Fees](#) for the up-to-date information and how tuition fees might affect you.

Universities have introduced bursary/scholarship schemes to assist students who are from low-income backgrounds and for students who wish to study shortage subjects.

- In order to find out how much it will cost to study at a particular university you will have to check their fees and your potential eligibility for any of their bursary schemes.
- Read about [bursaries and scholarships](#).

Even then, this may not give you the full picture, as costs vary across institutions. Ask the question.

- If you wish to be thorough, ask universities how much it will cost for you to join the sports centre, connect to WiFi, use the library photocopier or bring your family to your graduation ceremony.
- Many universities supply this type of detail in their prospectus and on their website.
- If you are planning to start university in 2014–15, use our [Student Loan Repayment Calculator](#) for an insight into how much you may need to repay and how long it may take.

In summary, underestimate cost at your peril and remember to budget for your social life too.

- Read the articles on [Financial Support](#) and [Managing Your Money](#) for more advice.
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Making the Decision

Compile a short list of possible universities.

- For some, location will be critical and this will immediately narrow down the choice.
- Others may be keen to go to a prestigious or high-ranking university and then have to consider whether they can meet the entry requirements.
- For most, it is a combination of factors such as these that will result in the elimination of most universities, so that a manageable list of perhaps ten or fifteen will emerge. Then the detailed work begins.

The first sources of information will be the undergraduate prospectus, website and app.

- These are the main recruiting documents that universities produce and should include most of what you will need to know, including details of courses, facilities and entry requirements.
- Prospectuses and websites are not impartial; they are designed by the marketing and advertising department to make the university seem attractive. The sun is always shining in prospectus photographs.
- Good quality prospectuses and websites will give you a feel for a university's priorities. Nothing replaces a face-to-face visit.
- The website will generally have the most up-to-date module choice and financial details.
- Our [University Profiles](#) include links to the individual university websites.
- The website might give you the chance to take a virtual tour of the university. Departments will usually have their own sites and you can often access student handbooks for all the detail you will ever need about courses, options, teaching methods and assessment.

Another easy way of obtaining a pile of prospectuses and departmental booklets is to visit a higher education fair where most universities will have a stand to give out information.

- You may also get an opportunity to ask specific questions to a representative from the university.
- A list of the events for applicants starting university in 2013–14 can be obtained from the [UCAS website](#).

If you are still unclear about entry requirements, check [University & College Entrance: the Official UCAS Guide](#) or the entry profiles on the [UCAS website](#).

- If you want more information about employment or about how happy students are with their courses or about what external examiners have had to say, you can go to the [Unistats website](#).

A personal visit to the university is essential

- You can get a feel for the atmosphere of a university and find out just how far you will have to walk between the lecture theatres and the students' union when it is raining.
- Don't forget that open days are designed to make you want to apply and so you should be critical of what you see and hear, just like when you read a prospectus and look at the website.
- If you are unable to make the date of the Open Day, some departments might make arrangements for you to visit more informally

- during the summer.
- A few universities offer residential visits or accommodation viewing days, which allow a more extended and comprehensive look at the university.

While trawling through all these sources of information, you will no doubt talk to friends, parents, teachers, careers advisers and anyone else who comes within range.

- While it is good to talk, times have changed.
- A parent or teacher may have some relevant experience, this might be 20 or 30 years ago. Universities have changed a lot since then.
- Go and see for yourself.

Checklist – choosing a university

- Which universities offer your chosen subject?
 - Where are they ranked in the Complete University Guide [League Tables](#)?
 - How far away from home do you want to go?
 - Which facilities are important to you?
 - Have you looked at the website?
 - Have you got a copy of the prospectus(es)?
 - Is there an Open Day you can attend?
 - What are the costs of going to university?
 - Is the library open 24 hours a day; how far is it from your accommodation?
 - Does the university cater for your hobbies or interests?
 - What are the career prospects like?
 - Is there a culture of students taking placement years, sandwich placements or year abroad programmes, if that is important to you?
 - What is the campus like – location, single site, low travel costs?
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