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Choosing and applying for your course

INTRODUCTION

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognise the benefits of studying in the UK
- Identify different types of courses
- Judge the suitability of courses
- Understand the application process
- Apply for a course

There are over 300 universities and colleges in the UK, offering thousands of higher education courses. Which one should you choose? To make your decision easier, this chapter provides information about the types of qualifications available, the factors to consider when choosing a course and university, and how to apply.

Why should I study in the UK?

There are many benefits of studying and living in the UK. The education system has an excellent reputation, and it is internationally recognised. The quality of teaching and learning is high. Further, courses focus on the development of skills, as well as subject knowledge, which will enable you to learn valuable attributes such as problem solving, critical and creative thinking, independence, and group work. These skills will aid your personal development and success after graduation. Studying in the UK will also allow you to experience its rich culture, improve your English skills, and access other European countries during your vacations.

Types of courses

A wide range of undergraduate (first degree) and postgraduate courses are available. Most undergraduate programmes lead to a Bachelor's degree. Students who do not

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have appropriate entry requirements for a degree might be able to start with a lower level qualification such as a Higher National Diploma or Foundation Degree. The majority of university programmes fall under the following classifications.

Certificate in Higher Education This programme is one year (full-time) in duration. It covers the underlying concepts of a subject and develops skills such as problem solving. It is generally equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree.

Higher National Diploma and Foundation Degree These courses are work-related and involve more detailed study and application of topics. Foundation degrees are designed and taught in partnership with employers to provide job-related knowledge and skills. They are equivalent to the first two years of an undergraduate degree. If completed successfully, they can lead to entry on to the third year of a Bachelor degree.

Bachelor degree This is an undergraduate degree that covers advanced knowledge and application of study skills and takes three or four years to complete (subjects such as medicine and dentistry require longer). Traditionally, degrees are awarded with or without Honours (Honours is regarded as a higher level); if a student does not achieve the Honours standard, they may be awarded an Ordinary degree (see Chapter 8).

Why should I study in the UK?

Studying in the UK has many benefits:

- *Internationally recognized and respected qualifications.* The UK higher education system is world-renowned. A degree or other qualification will demonstrate your knowledge and skills, and will enhance your career prospects.
- *Quality.* Universities have excellent teaching and learning standards. Academic quality is checked regularly to ensure good quality teaching and learning experiences.
- *Accessibility and variety.* There is a range of access routes to higher education, and attendance on many courses is flexible. There is also a wide variety of programmes.
- *Shorter and intensive degrees save time and money.* Some courses, particularly three-year undergraduate degrees and one-year Master degrees, are shorter in duration compared to equivalent courses in other countries.
- *Research excellence.* UK universities have excellent research profiles and facilities.
- *British culture and easy access to Europe.* The UK has a rich culture and history that can be explored during your leisure time. It is also easy and inexpensive to travel to other European countries during your vacations.
- *Immersion in an English language environment.* Studying in an English-speaking country, surrounded by native speakers, will help you to improve your English language and communication skills.

- *Personal development.* Courses will develop your skills and personal qualities. Experience in another country and culture will also widen your perspective on life.
- *Emigration.* It may be possible to stay in the UK after graduation, for further study or for other reasons.
- *Fun! Life is all about having fun, and enjoying yourself.* There are many opportunities to enjoy an active social life.

Some universities offer courses that lead only to ordinary degrees with the option, possibly, to achieve the 'Honours' level as an add-on. However, nowadays most degrees are Honours degrees. Courses either cover a single subject (called single Honours), equal coverage of two subjects (joint Honours), or an unequal combination of two (combined Honours).

Graduate Certificate and Diploma These are postgraduate courses (a higher level than a bachelor degree). They involve advanced knowledge and development of study skills. A postgraduate course can also serve as a conversion course to introduce a new subject. A popular course is the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which is a teaching qualification that prepares graduates for teaching in schools, as well as in colleges and universities.

Master degree A Master degree is a postgraduate programme that teaches advanced knowledge and analysis of complex issues. It enables a high development of study skills, particularly research skills. Master degrees can be either taught courses, research-based, or a combination of both. They are one or two years in duration. A popular Master degree is the MBA (Master of Business Administration), which covers management and business skills. Some Master degrees, such as arts degrees in Scotland, and Integrated Master programmes in engineering, science, and mathematics, are actually four-year undergraduate programmes that include postgraduate study.

Doctorate A range of doctorate degrees are available. A PhD is a doctoral research degree that involves a detailed investigation and evaluation of a topic and leads to the creation of new knowledge. It involves advanced research techniques and academic enquiry. Other courses, particularly professional doctorates, have a substantial taught part and emphasise professional practice more than academic scholarship. A new type of PhD is the 'New Route PhD', which is interdisciplinary, and includes taught courses alongside the development of professional skills and a research project.

There are other types of courses available in UK universities. They include:

- Diploma in health (a three-year course in health-related areas such as midwifery and nursing).
- Short courses that do not count towards a formal award.

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- Access routes (e.g., Foundation Programmes) for students without appropriate entry requirements for a bachelor degree.
- A period of study in the UK that forms part of qualification awarded by a university in another country (e.g., study abroad schemes). The most common type of arrangement is the Socrates-Erasmus programme, which enables students in European countries to study in the UK for part of their degree.
- An English language course.
- Distance learning and external degrees that are studied at home, away from a university.

The Socrates-Erasmus programme

The Socrates-Erasmus programme is a scheme that allows European students to study in the UK (or in another European country). Eligible students can study in the UK for a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 12 months. The places and courses available depend on the arrangement between your university and their partner universities in the UK. Erasmus students do not pay tuition fees to the UK university and may be eligible for a grant towards expenses. Bear in mind, however, that courses in the UK require high English language ability. Also, the cost of living can be higher than in some other European countries. Further details about the programme are available from the Socrates-Erasmus Council.

Choosing your course and university

Where should you study? Choosing the right place requires careful consideration and should not be a last-minute decision.

There is no 'best' university or course. Your choice will depend on your personal preference and the good and bad points of different options. Below is a list of factors to consider, including the characteristics of different universities and their courses, as well as your suitability. Use the information to help judge your options.

Your suitability

Think about the subjects that you enjoy and are good at. You are likely to get the best out of your studies by pursuing a course that you are keen on. If you are already in the UK, you can attend Open Days and Taster Courses offered by universities to learn more about the area you want to study and to check out a university's facilities. Also, think about your career aspirations and how they relate to different courses. For example, careers such as medicine and dentistry require the completion of specific courses, whereas other jobs are open to graduates who have studied in different disciplines.

Course characteristics

There are many differences between courses. Even courses with the same name can vary between universities! Things to think about include:

- entry requirements (including English language requirements)
- course length, syllabus, and modes of study
- career prospects
- teaching and assessment methods
- work placements and training opportunities included in the course
- credit transfer (if you have already completed an undergraduate course, you might be able to transfer credits to another course)
- tuition fees and financial arrangements
- vocational courses tailored towards specific jobs, or academic ones that are not necessarily linked to any specific job or career
- courses can be accredited or approved by professional organisations and offer partial exemption from professional qualifications: examples include accounting courses, marketing management (Chartered Institute of Marketing), psychology degrees (British Psychological Society), and journalism (National Council for the Training of Journalists)
- recognition of the course in your country
- courses designed specifically for international students.

Course details are available from university prospectuses and websites, and higher education fairs and Open Days.

Entry requirements

Most courses have entry requirements, such as qualifications, exam scores, English language ability, work experience and, in some cases, financial and medical conditions. Be realistic about how your qualifications and skills match the requirements of the courses you are interested in.

Entry requirements can differ widely between courses and universities. The standard requirements for bachelor degrees are two or three GCE A-levels with GCSEs (in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland) or four or five Higher passes (in Scotland).

Requirements are described in terms of UK qualifications, so you will need to compare them with qualifications from your country. Advice is available from the Admissions Office at the universities you intend you study at. Further information is available from the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC).

Tip

Information about entry requirements is available from universities, colleges, and UCAS.

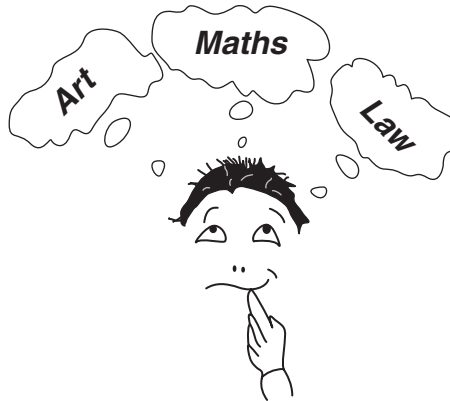
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You should also check that the standard of your English is good enough (see Chapter 3). A few universities may require applicants to sit an admissions test, especially for courses in dental, law, medical and veterinary schools.

Reputation

Another factor to consider when choosing a university and course is their reputation with regards to the quality of teaching, research, and student support. There is no official list of universities based on their performance. However, national newspapers have produced unofficial league tables which indicate that certain universities and courses have higher quality than others. League tables can be accessed from the following guides:

- The Good University Guide
- The *Sunday Times* Good University Guide
- The *Guardian* University Guide
- The *Daily Telegraph* University league table
- *Financial Times* League Table



Entry requirements differ between courses and universities. Table 1.1 lists in them as a general guide. All courses require proficiency in English (see Chapter 3).

League tables rank universities, and sometimes individual subjects, according to different performance criteria. The criteria include teaching and research quality, drop out rates, student satisfaction, staff-to-student ratio, library and computing facilities, and graduate employment rates. Each league table uses a different method to assess quality and, therefore, a university can have a different ranking on each table.

The league tables can be accessed via the websites listed directory at the end of this guide. You can use them to compare the performance of different universities; those at

Table 1.1 Entry requirements for courses in the UK

Type of course	Entry requirements	Duration
Certificate in Higher Education	Various. May require high school qualifications (e.g., GCE A-levels and GCSEs, or their equivalents), or no formal requirements.	One year (full-time)
Higher National Diploma; or Foundation degree	As above	Two years (full-time)
Foundation programme	As above	Six months or one year
Bachelor degree	High school qualifications.	Three to four years full-time. Some courses, such as medicine and dentistry, require longer
Sandwich course (Bachelor degree)	Same as a Bachelor degree	Four or five years
Postgraduate Certificate; Postgraduate Diploma	Bachelor degree	The Certificate takes 9 months; the Diploma requires 10 months (full time)
Postgraduate Certificate of Education	Bachelor degree or Master degree	One year full-time
Master degree	Bachelor degree	Usually one year. Integrated Master programmes) require four-years
PhD/DPhil)	Bachelor degree (usually a 2.i), or a Master degree	Usually three or four years full-time
Professional Doctorate	Bachelor degree or a Master degree. May require professional qualifications and work experience	Two to four years full-time

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the top are perceived as achieving a higher performance. Oxford and Cambridge tend to head the lists, followed usually by Imperial College and the London School of Economics (LSE). Other universities that often appear in the top ten are King's College London, University College London, University of Warwick and the University of York.

A few universities are traditionally distinguished in certain subjects, such as LSE for economics, and Imperial College for physics. The 'new universities' (those established in the 1960s, and previously known as polytechnics or colleges of higher education) occupy the lower sections of the tables. This is because they have traditionally focused on teaching technical and practical courses, whereas older universities placed more emphasis on research. However, the division between the two groups, and their position on league tables, has become blurred, as certain new universities now outperform older ones.

League tables are important because they are an indicator of quality. Some employers prefer graduates from top universities. News reports, for example, have claimed that graduates from high-ranking institutions earn higher salaries. Top universities are likely to have better research reputations and facilities, whereas universities lower on the list lead the latest developments in vocational courses.

However, your decision should not be based solely on league tables. They should be used as a general guide. Tables have been criticised because they do not include all measures of performance, do not include all universities, and are several years old. Choosing a university is a very personal decision, based on a variety of factors. The tables are useful, however, for providing information about the workings of universities and courses that interest you. If you do decide to use league tables, it is important to understand their good and bad points, and how their ratings are calculated (details are available from their websites).

Teaching and research quality

Every university has strict procedures to monitor and improve their quality. The law also regulates their power to award degrees. This assurance has led to good quality and the international reputation of British universities. However, academic quality varies between universities and departments. You can consider teaching and research quality when you choose somewhere to study. Data is available from two independent organisations that regularly assess the academic quality of universities:

- *Quality Assurance Agency (QQA)*. Visits every university department and inspects their quality of teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities.
- *Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)*. Assesses research quality conducted every 4–5 years.

Results are available from their websites. However, the quality assessments should be considered with caution; they are not league tables and every university has strengths and weaknesses. Another way to gauge the quality of a university, if you are already in

the UK, is to visit the university department that offers you a course and ask former students about their experiences there. Student feedback is also available from

- The Teaching Quality Information survey
- *Times* Higher Student Satisfaction Rating.

Oxbridge

Oxford and Cambridge universities are collectively known as 'Oxbridge'. They are the oldest and most famous universities in the UK, and have a reputation for academic excellence. Many famous politicians, scientists and other distinguished people have studied at them. Oxford and Cambridge have a number of well known traditions; for example, the two universities compete with each other at an annual Boat Race, which dates back to 1829.

Oxford and Cambridge have a collegiate structure. This means that each university consists of more than 30 colleges and every student is a member of a college and their university. This system enables students to belong to both a large university and to enjoy a smaller college community. The college is the focus of academic and social life (where students live and study), whereas the university is primarily responsible for teaching, exams, and awarding degrees.

If you want to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, you should bear in mind that there is intense competition for places; an excellent academic background and references are required. The application process starts earlier than most other universities, and there are earlier closing dates. For undergraduate applications, you must complete a university application form in addition to the UCAS form. There are differences in the application process for students in different countries, so you should read up-to-date information from each university's prospectus and website.

Career prospects and employability of recent graduates

It is worth looking at the employment record and destinations of recent graduates at specific universities, courses, and for the UK overall. The data could provide insights about your future career prospects. Information is available from:

- universities and their departments
- university careers' centres
- the Higher Education Statistics Agency. They produce a report titled 'Destination of leavers from Higher Education'
- the Prospects website.

Location, size, and safety

Universities differ in their type, size, location and surroundings. Think about the type of place you would prefer to live and study in.

Undergraduate and postgraduate courses can be studied at universities, university colleges, or colleges/institutes of higher education. Some courses, such as HNDs and Foundation degrees, are also available at Colleges of Further Education, which mainly cater for education up to the age of 18 and provide lower level courses for school leavers.

Location should also be considered. Universities are based in towns and cities, or in rural locations. Urban universities may be in the city centre, or in a suburb and areas vary in their pleasantness and safety. Rural universities have many amenities on campus but may be cut off from the outside world. Consider the availability of services such as banks, shops, supermarkets, and whether they are in walking distance to your lodgings. It is worthwhile to consider local transport services, and whether the university has restrictions on student parking (which could determine whether or not you can drive to your lectures if you intend to own a car).

Large universities can have more than 30,000 students, whereas smaller colleges have less than 1,000. Smaller institutions are likely to have smaller class sizes and, therefore, more interaction between students and professors and a strong sense of community. However, larger universities will have a wide variety of courses, an established research reputation, good facilities, and ample social and entertainment facilities.

Another point to bear in mind is the diversity of the student population. Universities differ in their mix of international students, mature students, etc.

Facilities, support, and social life

Good universities provide excellent facilities and support services such as libraries, computer and internet access, laboratories, teaching equipment, and sporting facilities.

There should also be health and welfare services, such as university medical and dental care, childcare for students with children, counselling, and places of religious worship (see Chapter 6). If you have a disability, it is important to find out the type of support available, how much it costs, and, if applicable, whether buildings can be accessed (see Chapter 6).

Some universities have a big and active student union that has a bar and organises social events. They could have student groups and societies about social, political and academic issues, which are good places to meet new friends, socialise, and pursue your interests.

Tip

If you are in the UK, you can attend an 'open day' to tour the university and academic departments, and ask students about their experiences.

Support for international students

Look for a university that has a good support system for students from outside the UK, including specialist advice and help for studying and settling in. Support services typically include:



- international student advisors who give advice about immigration, employment, health care, visas, and many other issues
- induction programmes to help you settle into your new surroundings
- meeting and greeting you at the airport when you first arrive
- international societies that organise trips and events.

If English is not your first language, ask prospective universities if they offer English language support classes before and during the academic year (and whether they are free or not).

Living costs, financial assistance, and accommodation

Tuition fees vary between courses, and some courses are longer (and therefore more expensive) than others. Also, the cost of living varies widely between areas. Other things to think about include the availability of part-time work (and whether the university offers assistance to help you find it), and any university restrictions on working. Universities provide funding through scholarships and bursaries, although they are competitive and need to be applied for 1-2 years before the course begins. Check whether the university offers accommodation, the types available, and if they guarantee

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a place for international students (see Chapter 2). You can also work out how much money you need to live at different universities. Chapter 4 provides guidance about living and study costs and how to estimate them.

The British Council and UKCOSA

A lot of information is available from the British Council, which is an organisation that provides details about educational opportunities in the UK. It has offices around the world that provide advice about a range of topics, such as different types of courses and universities, how to fund your studies, visas, work, internships, etc. They provide information about UK culture and life and organise campaigns to attract international students. Further details are available from their website.

Another organisation you will find helpful is UKCOSA, which is the country's national advisory body concerning international students. They provide advice to international students about a wide range of issues, and produce a comprehensive set of guidance notes. Visit their website to learn more about them and how they can help you.

Making a decision

After reading this chapter, you will be aware of the different aspects to think about when choosing a course. Take your time and choose carefully. Make a shortlist of universities and courses that best match your needs, and then consider each one in detail. As you find out about different options, you can use the checklist below to remind you of the important points to bear in mind.

Also, UCAS provide two questionnaires (called the Stamford Test, and Centrigrade) that allow you to match your abilities and interests to subjects. They are available from the UCAS website.

Applying for a course

After you have carefully chosen a university and course, the next step is to apply. The application process differs for undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Undergraduate courses

Applications for most full-time undergraduate courses (e.g., foundation degrees, HNDs, and bachelor degrees) are processed by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which is a centralised application process. Some courses,

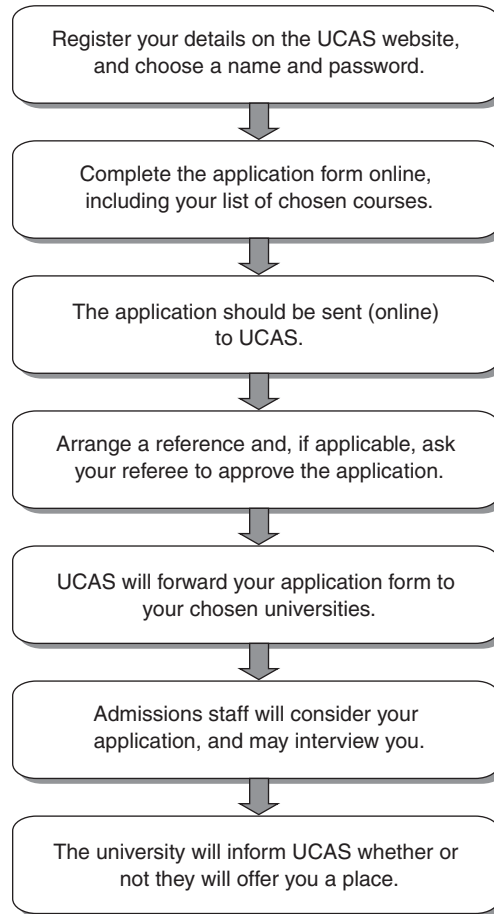


Figure 1.1 The UCAS application process

such as part-time programmes, have a different application process, and you should contact the relevant university for details.

Applications via UCAS begin in September. It is advisable to apply as early as possible because courses can become full, and some universities do not consider later applications. Also, you will need time for visa applications, to make arrangements to travel to the UK, perhaps attend a preparation (summer) class, or arrange funding. Note that Cambridge and Oxford, and medicine, dentistry, and art and design courses elsewhere require early applications. The closing date for applications from students resident in the UK/EU differs from students resident in other countries. Visit the UCAS website to see the closing dates.

All applications take place online. If you are currently studying as an international student in a British school or college, or at an overseas school registered with UCAS,

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your school will help with your application. If not, you should apply yourself, by completing an application form on the UCAS website. There is an application fee, which must be paid online using a credit or debit card. If you do not have Internet access, your local British Council office may be able to provide it.

After you complete your application, UCAS will send the details to the universities you listed on the application form. An Admissions Tutor for each course will consider your details, and will decide whether or not to offer you a place. This process takes about one to two months. You can track the progress of your application on the UCAS website. An Admissions Tutor will send their decision to UCAS, and they will then forward it to you. If a university decides to offer you a place, it will be either 'unconditional', which means you have satisfied the entry requirements and can attend the university, or 'conditional', if you have not yet achieved them. Alternatively, a university could decide to decline your application. When you have received a reply from all of your choices, you can decide which offers to accept. Only two choices are allowed – a first choice and an insurance choice.

If you receive a conditional offer but later do not achieve the entry requirements, contact the university to see if they will still offer you a place. UCAS offers an option called 'UCAS Extra' for students who have no offer (for example, if all their choices were rejected, or they declined all their offers). This option allows the choice of an additional course. The service ends in June. In August and September, there is a service called Clearing, which enables students who do not have a place to apply for courses that still have vacancies.

Postgraduate courses

There is no centralised application process for postgraduate courses, except for PGCE programmes that are handled by the Graduate Teacher Training Registry (GTTR). Applications for other programmes should be made directly to the university you want to study at (each one has its own application process, form, and closing dates). An application pack can be requested from the university. The application form requires your personal details, your qualifications and experiences, a personal statement, and a reference. On the personal statement you can highlight your reasons for wanting to study the course, your previous academic successes, and relevant work experience.

There are three main types of postgraduate degrees: taught courses, research degrees, or a mixture of both. Taught courses have some similarities to undergraduate degrees because they involve modules and units, a variety of teaching and assessment methods, and a dissertation and exams. Taught courses include postgraduate certificates, postgraduate diplomas, and Master degrees.

The second type of course, a research degree (e.g., MPhil or PhD), requires little attendance in formal lectures. They require an in-depth investigation of a topic and are supervised by two academic staff. During a research degree you will attend

seminars about research methods, review the literature about a topic, collect and analyse data, and write a thesis. There are also professional doctorates, which involve research activities in the workplace, alongside taught courses. A new course is the 'New Route PhD', which combines interdisciplinary courses with a research project.

If you plan to study for a research degree, you should identify an area of study, and contact a potential supervisor. It is best to find out as much as you can about potential supervisors, including their research area, reputation and international profile, research quality, published work, and whether you would be studying alone or as part of a research team. Consider reading their previous research reports, and ask former research students about their experiences. The availability of funding is another issue to consider. See Chapter 7 for more about research degrees and how to find a suitable supervisor.

Tip

Ask a native English speaker to read your application form to ensure there are no grammar and spelling mistakes.

What do you want from a course and university?

There are many factors to consider when choosing the right place to study

Course characteristics

- Subject that interests you
- Course you will be good at
- Course duration
- Career opportunities
- Vocational or academic course
- Teaching & assessment methods
- Entry requirements
- English language requirements
- Suitability for international students
- Recognised in your country

Reputation and quality

- Position in league tables
- Old or new university

Facilities, support, and social life

- Libraries and computers
- Sporting facilities
- Catering facilities
- Health and dental services
- Counselling and advisory services
- Places for religious worship
- Services for disabled students
- Guaranteed accommodation
- Student groups and societies

Support for international students

- International student advisors
- Induction programme

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- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching quality | <input type="checkbox"/> Airport meet-and-greet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research quality | <input type="checkbox"/> English language support |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student satisfaction | <input type="checkbox"/> International societies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employability of recent graduates | |

Location and size

- Rural or urban
- City or suburbs
- Number of students
- Availability of amenities
- Transport links

Finances

- Tuition fees
- Cost of living
- Availability of part-time work
- Financial support
- Assistance to find part-time work

Completing the UCAS application form

Admission tutors at universities and colleges will use the information you provide in your UCAS application to make a decision about whether or not to offer you a place.

The UCAS form requires the following:

- personal details (e.g., your name, date of birth, address, and ethnic background)
- choice of courses (you can choose up to six courses, or four if you are applying for medicine, dentistry, or veterinary medicine)
- details about your secondary education experience
- qualifications you have, or expect to achieve, before the course begins
- details about your previous employment
- a personal statement
- a reference from your teacher, head teacher, or employer.

Personal statement

A personal statement is a personal essay that should explain your reasons for choosing the course and area of study; why you find them interesting; your interests relevant to the subject; your career aspirations; your previous work experience (particularly if relevant to your course); and other areas of achievement. You can also mention your hobbies and interests, and the skills they enabled you to develop (e.g., meeting deadlines, communication skills, problem solving, and self-motivation).

Reference

The application should be supported by a reference. The referee should be someone who knows you well and can therefore comment on your ability for higher education. The referee can be a teacher, head teacher, or employer, but cannot be a family member, relative, or friend.

Tips

- complete all required sections, and follow the instructions
- pay attention to detail
- make sure there are no grammar and spelling mistakes
- be honest when you write the personal statement
- don't include irrelevant information.

Further help

If you need help to complete the UCAS application form, you can contact UCAS, the Admissions Office at universities, your teacher or careers advisor, and your local British Council office. Some universities may have an office or representative in your country. There are also books available to help you complete the form.