Choosing a Course and University

Choosing the right higher education course and the right institution are obviously very important decisions and there is an enormous amount of information available to help you make an informed choice. This advice sheet is designed to help you focus on the main issues that will affect your choice of degree course and which universities and colleges you apply to.

Types of Higher Education

For most people, ‘higher education’ means ‘university’, but it is important to remember that there are different types of higher education. In addition to universities, there are colleges and institutions of higher education. A number of further education colleges also offer higher education courses.

Universities in the UK include both established universities and newer universities. Universities, colleges and institutions of higher education all offer a wide choice of Honours degree programmes. In addition, many offer Foundation Degrees, Higher National Diplomas and Diplomas of Higher Education. The important thing to remember is that with such a wide range of possibilities, you should be able to find a suitable course, whatever you want to study.

Where to Find Information

- **UCAS**
  The Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) is the first source of information for most students. The UCAS website lists institutions, courses and entrance requirements. It also includes comprehensive advice and information on choosing a university and explains how to apply: [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

- **Undergraduate Prospectuses**
  Once you have decided on a list of institutions that you would like more information about, the next step is to take a look at the university or college undergraduate prospectuses. These give more detailed information about each institution, its accommodation, libraries, computing facilities, welfare support, finance information, sporting and social facilities, clubs and societies, and the city or town where the university or college is located. They also usually include information on all of the courses on offer at that institution, together with details of entry requirements, the course structure and assessment methods.

  You can obtain an undergraduate prospectus free of charge by requesting one from institutions’ websites or by e-mailing or telephoning the institutions direct. Your careers library may also have a reference copy of each institution’s prospectus.

- **Course Brochures**
  It is important to find out details of the individual courses that you are interested in at different institutions, as courses of the same name may be different at different universities. As well as the information available on university websites, many institutions also produce individual subject brochures which cover the content of degree programmes in more detail.

- **University Websites**
  University and college websites include up-to-date information specifically for prospective students. You can get information about particular subject areas by consulting the ‘course search’ or subject area home pages. Many institutions now also publish virtual tours and video content on their websites.
• **Higher Education Guides**

Many universities and colleges provide information to external higher education guides such as *The Complete University Guide* and *The Sunday Times University Guide*. These guides contain facts, figures and comparative assessments of universities. Some also contain league tables, ranking universities and subject areas, which enable students to assess strengths and weaknesses of each university. These guides come in the form of reference books, websites and interactive CD-ROMs, which may be available in the careers library of your school or college.

There are also alternative guides, which are written by students, such as the *Virgin Alternative Guide to British Universities*. Websites such as Whatuni also provide university reviews written by students: www.whatuni.com

• **Visit Days**

Visiting a university or college is one of the best ways of finding out what it is really like. Attending visit days prior to choosing which universities to apply to can be very helpful, as it will give you an idea of whether you would really like to study there for three or four years. You will have an opportunity to talk to staff and current students, explore the campus and facilities, find out more about the subject(s) you are interested in and get a real ‘feel’ for what it is like to study there.

• **Higher Education Fairs**

During Year 12 or 13 (or college equivalent) you should have an opportunity to visit a higher education fair, where you can speak to representatives from the majority of UK higher education institutions. Higher education fairs are held between March and July in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and between August and October in Scotland. If you prepare for these events in advance and think about the questions you have about the universities and their courses, this can be an effective way of talking to a large number of universities all in one day. The fairs also give you the chance to gather prospectuses and brochures from a large number of institutions.

• **Taster Sessions**

Many universities and colleges organise departmental taster sessions where you can try out subject(s) you are interested in. Some of these enable you to stay overnight in student accommodation. Further details of these events can usually be found on the institution’s website or in their prospectus.

• **Teachers, Careers Advisers and Relatives**

Don’t forget that there are many people around who have lots of expertise to help you choose a university. Teachers, careers advisers, parents, friends and relatives may all be able to offer useful advice. At the same time, it is also important to remember that choosing a university or college and course is your decision.

• **Useful Websites**

Always make use of the resources on the web to add to your research. In addition to those already mentioned, here are a few sites that might be of interest to you:

**Student Finance**

The Directgov website provides information on the range of financial help available, including tuition fees and bursaries.

www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance

**Scholarships**

The Hotcourses website provides information about the undergraduate scholarships that are offered by universities.

www.scholarship-search.org.uk

**Careers**

Prospects gives details of different occupations as well as advice about career planning.

www.prospects.ac.uk

**Taking a Year Out**

The following websites provide useful information about how you can spend your gap year.

www.gapyear.com
www.yearoutgroup.org

**Other Websites**

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of students’ unions.

www.nus.org.uk

SKILL is the national bureau for students with disabilities.

www.skill.org.uk

QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) undertakes assessment of all universities in the UK on the quality of their teaching.

www.qaa.ac.uk
Choosing the Right Course
The most important decision you have to make is your choice of course. One of the most common reasons for students dropping out of university or college is that they have chosen the wrong subject, or that they have not done enough research into the content of their course before applying. With over 51,000 courses to choose from in the UK, the possibilities are enormous, which also means that you have to do a lot of careful research before making your final decision.

• Subject
When choosing your course, try not to be limited by the subjects that you are studying at the moment. There are many courses where you do not need to have studied particular subjects before, and other options will be available to you because of the skills you have gained from your current studies. For example, if you are interested in Mathematics and Physics, you might want to consider Engineering. Skills in languages could lead you to the study of other languages such as Italian, Russian, Portuguese or oriental languages; skills in Chemistry or Biology could lead you to Biochemistry, Medicine or medically related degrees as well as to subjects like Environmental Science, Agriculture and Animal Science. If you are unsure about which course you would be suited to, the Stamford Test is a short questionnaire which can help match your interests and abilities to possible subjects. This is available on the UCAS website: www.ucas.com

• Type of Course
You might want to consider combining two or more subjects. This could be as a joint degree where you study 50 per cent of each subject, or a major/minor combination where two thirds of your course is in one subject and one third in another. Many universities and colleges also offer combined courses which allow you to combine several different subjects. Other possibilities include sandwich courses, where you spend one or more periods during your course working in industry or studying abroad.

• Course Structure
You may also want to look at the way in which courses are structured. Some are traditional in structure, and are assessed at the end of each year by written examinations. Others are modular in structure, with courses made up of a series of modules that are assessed individually. Some courses operate within an academic year of three terms, while others have a two-semester year which may mean that assessment takes place twice each year.

You may also want to consider opportunities for travel or study abroad, language courses to support this travel, and opportunities to specialise in your chosen area of study.

• Entrance Requirements
You also need to take into account the entry requirements for your particular course and the likely grades you will be asked to achieve. In making these choices, it is important to be realistic. Consult your tutors about your predicted grades and try to make choices which will reflect those grades, or will at least provide you with a fall-back position if you do not achieve the necessary results to be accepted on to the course of your choice. The course that you are interested in may take into account other factors, such as personal qualities, motivation, artistic ability, a good portfolio of evidence of work, a good reference and a good personal statement.

• Accreditation
In some subject areas, such as Engineering, Psychology, Accounting, Architecture and Town Planning, courses are accredited by the relevant professional bodies. Check university prospectuses and subject brochures to see whether the course you are interested in has been accredited. These accreditations are often recognised by employers.

• Careers
Some professions require specific subjects to be studied at higher education level. If you know what career you would like to do in the future, research the job to see if any qualifications are essential. The Prospects website (www.prospects.ac.uk) is one place where you can find this information. It is also worth looking into what opportunities there are to gain work experience or work-related skills at your chosen universities. This will help you when applying for jobs after graduation.

Factors Affecting your Choice of University or College
When deciding where to apply, there are many factors that will be important to you. Some of the usual ones are listed here, but it may be that you have other considerations, or that the ones listed are not particularly important to you. The crucial thing is to decide what you want from university, and to gather the right information.
• **Type of Institution**

The type of institution may be important to you. Would you prefer to study at a campus university, where everything is provided on site, or at a city-centre university, where the university buildings are part of the main city? Both options have advantages and disadvantages, and it is up to you to decide which you would prefer.

Some universities are collegiate, which means that you are a member of a college (which is often where you live) as well as being a member of the university. The most well-known collegiate universities are Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. Some universities and colleges have a particular emphasis on science and technology or on arts and humanities. Some have a progressive curriculum, while others are more traditional. Your choice will depend on your personal preferences and on the availability of your chosen course.

• **Size of Institution**

The size of the university or college may be something that you want to consider. Some students prefer to be part of a large student society, whereas others prefer to be in a small and intimate community where everyone knows everybody else. In cities such as Manchester, Newcastle, Leeds, Sheffield and London, there will be many thousands of students. This can have advantages in terms of special deals for students, discounts at cinemas or in restaurants and on buses. However, if you would prefer to be part of a smaller community, it might be worth considering some of the smaller universities or the colleges of higher education.

• **Accommodation**

If you are planning to study away from home, student accommodation will be important to you. You might want to consider the choice of accommodation available: halls of residence where everything is provided; self-catering where you do your own cooking and washing-up; private accommodation in the local area or lodgings with landlords. The cost of that accommodation, and the extent to which university or college accommodation is guaranteed, particularly in your first year of study, is also worth finding out about. If you don’t like getting up early in the morning, and are likely to have lots of 9am lectures, perhaps it would also be wise to consider how far away from campus the accommodation is!

• **Distance from Home**

Distance from home may be an issue for you. You might want to travel as far away from home as possible and only go home in the holidays or for the occasional weekend. If so, you need to consider how easy it is to get to your chosen university or college, and also look at public transport timetables and cost. You can view a map of universities and colleges on the UCAS website: [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

• **Social Opportunities**

Fortunately, higher education is not just about writing essays and passing exams! Your time at university or college offers a great opportunity to make new friends, develop new interests and learn new skills. Don’t forget to check out the sporting and social facilities at your chosen university or college, as well as in the local area.

• **The Feel of the Place**

One of the best ways to find out whether a university or college is right for you is to go along to an open day or visit day. Take the opportunity to ask lots of questions, talk to students, look around the campus, and find out about the course.

**And Finally...**

Remember that, having done careful research, the choice is yours. Think about your own preferences, your motivation and your interests. Choose for yourself. If you do so, it is much more likely that your time at university or college will be enjoyable, fulfilling and successful.

**Further Information**

To find out more about Newcastle University and its facilities, including accommodation, sports and social activities, or the city and surrounding area, take a look at the University’s website or request an **Undergraduate Prospectus** from: [www.ncl.ac.uk/undergraduate](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/undergraduate)