



Starting to think about university - questions and answers for students

What are you hoping to do when you finish your A levels or vocational course?

One option is of course to look for a job. However, there are not many jobs that you can go into where A levels are the requirement.

How about an Apprenticeship? These are an excellent way of getting into a career, but do your research carefully. Find out what the level of the Apprenticeship is (there's no point going into one designed for someone with GCSEs only), and what the employment rate is after an apprenticeship you are interested in (there is no guarantee of a job). There are not enough good apprenticeships around to meet demand and many applicants are disappointed. A back-up plan is always a good idea.

For a large number of students, going into higher education - whether at a university or a college - is the right route, and you should certainly consider it seriously.

Why consider higher education?

- almost all professional jobs require a higher level qualification
- opportunities for high quality training without a higher level qualification are more limited
- those with higher level qualifications are promoted faster once at work
- you are much less likely to be unemployed during your working life
- those with higher level qualifications earn significantly more
- the job market - the majority of new jobs during the next decade will require a higher level qualification such as a degree

This guide will help you to find out more about university, and take you through the process of researching your options and making a successful application.

Find answers to these questions and more:

- is higher education for me?
- what can I study?
- what qualifications will I need?
- where can I study?
- how do I apply?
- where can I get more information?

Is higher education for me?

Isn't it just like doing extra years at school or college?

No - the experience won't be the same at all. The working week and year, type of work and assignments, facilities, social life and wider experiences and opportunities available will be different.

Am I clever enough?

If you are taking (or have completed) A levels or a level 3 vocational course such as BTEC National, and passing your assignments, the answer is yes. If you can achieve the entrance qualifications for a higher level course you are capable of succeeding on it.

Is it really hard work?

Obviously you will have to work to succeed, but you will be studying something you really enjoy and which offers you great future prospects, alongside others who want to do well. Many students say that their advanced level qualification was more pressured than their university course. The ability to organise and plan your own work is important, and there is plenty of study help available to higher education students.

Isn't it expensive?

Yes, but you won't have to find any money 'up front' and there is plenty of financial help available. It's important to consider the long term financial benefits as well. More information on this is available - make sure you check all the financial facts.

What about working part-time?

Higher education courses offer plenty of opportunity for part-time work to be fitted in (many universities have their own 'job shops'), and there are long holidays when full time work may be possible. Some large employers actively target students to work part-time for them.

How do I know I'll like it? Nobody in my family has been in higher education

It doesn't matter at all. Not so long ago only 10% of people went to university and now 50% are expected to go, so there are plenty of people in that position. Go to Open Days or talk to an existing student and find out what it's like. There are some good websites where you can find out more as well. Very few people regret going into higher education - many people regret not having gone when they had the opportunity.

Can I think about it and go later?

Yes, if you don't feel ready. Many people who missed out apply to university as mature students - it's never too late. However, the experience will be different and it

can be a more difficult decision to make once you are settled in a job. The important thing is to make an informed choice and not dismiss the higher education route. Make sure you look into it whilst you have the opportunity to go on visits and get information and support, and then make your decision using that information.

What can I study?

That depends on your interests, career plans, the qualifications and skills you have and those you are going to take. There are over 300 universities and colleges offering thousands of degrees and other qualifications in the UK. As well as well-known and popular courses like English, Chemistry, Nursing and Psychology, there are courses which use similar content but may interest you more, such as American Studies, Chemistry for Forensic Science, Health Promotion or Sport Psychology. There are even some surprising courses like Golf Management or Footwear Design, and courses you may not have heard of such as Actuarial Science, Agronomy, Akkadian - and that's just A!

Start by considering what you are studying now. Do you want a course in the same or in a similar field to this?

If you have a career in mind, there will probably be a higher education course for you which fits the bill.

If neither of these is the case, you need to think more creatively and maybe seek help from an adviser. For many courses there are no essential subjects needed to apply. There is a huge range of courses available, many of which you won't be aware of, and many can be started with no prior experience, including for those taking vocational qualifications - you don't have to take a similar subject at university.

Types of Course in Higher Education

Degree

These are mostly taught in universities and usually require three years of study. A few offer part-time routes, which will obviously take longer to complete. Degree courses are based on academic study, although many have a strong practical element as well. 'Sandwich' courses are 4 years and incorporate a year of paid work experience.

Minimum entrance requirements are 2 A levels, though most require 3 subjects. For vocational learners minimum requirements would be a pass at National Diploma or NVQ3, but again most courses will ask for at least Merits, and you will also need a GCSE in English for all courses (and for some courses also a GCSE in maths). GCSE is definitely preferred - equivalent qualifications are sometimes (but not always) acceptable.

Assessment on degrees is by a combination of assignments and exams.

Foundation Degree

These are taught in universities and in many Further Education Colleges.

A Foundation Degree is, in effect, the first two years of a degree. It can be used as a 'stand alone' qualification or can be 'topped up' to a full degree by an additional period of study.

There are two years of study full-time. Colleges may offer part-time routes, usually completing after 3 years. Foundation degrees are a combination of academic and vocational work. The level of a Foundation degree is lower than that of a degree, and minimum entrance requirements reflect this, making them ideal for students who would like to study at a higher level but are less likely to achieve higher grades on their level 3 course. They are also very suitable for work-based learners, who can use their experience in their assignments. A pass in 2 A levels is usual, or a National Diploma or NVQ3, or appropriate work experience. English (and sometimes maths) at level 2 are also often required - GCSE is preferred but equivalent qualifications are usually acceptable.

Foundation degrees are flexible, vocationally focused qualifications designed to meet the needs of employers and containing work placements and work-based projects.

Assessment is usually by a combination of work-based projects, assignments and sometimes examinations.

Higher National Diploma (HND)

Two years of study. These are vocational / practical courses at the same level as Foundation Degrees and with similar requirements.

Higher National Certificate (HNC)

Two years of study on a day release or evening basis, for those in employment. Students can 'top up' to HND with the addition of an additional period of study.

N.B. For all courses, applications from mature students are considered differently. The same qualifications may not be required, although usually appropriate experience and evidence of the ability to study at a higher level will be required, such as recent experience of an evening or community based course.

Where do I start?

The easiest way to find courses and their entrance requirements is on the UCAS website (www.ucas.com). UCAS is the University and Colleges Admissions Service and the website has all the information you need on higher level study.

A starting point for yourself is to make a list of the features of your current course which you enjoy and look for courses offering a similar type of study.

Consider, for example, these sorts of things:

- problem solving
- practical/technical work
- making calculations
- doing experiments
- research - library or internet
- reading widely / reading new material
- making presentations
- discussion in groups
- exchanging opinions / discussion
- writing
- creative work / using my own ideas
- considering theories and ideas

What qualifications will I need?

Advanced qualifications

Entrance to higher level courses can be more flexible than you think. Anyone studying at level 3 can apply. Higher education is also available to Advanced Apprentices and those with higher level NVQ qualifications. Mature students may be admitted without formal qualifications if they have relevant experience (although evidence of the ability to study at a higher level is likely to be required, such as an Access course).

Entrance qualifications vary between courses and between universities and colleges. The higher your grades, the more choices you will have open to you. However, even if you have a basic pass there will be courses to suit you. The secret of success is to research your options carefully so that you apply for appropriate courses for the qualifications you have or expect to achieve. If you apply too high you will simply not get offers. At the same time, don't undersell yourself - aim for the best course you can realistically achieve, as courses do have a 'market value' to employers depending on where they are taken. However, a word of warning - the courses regarded as 'best' are not always where you might assume they will be... do your research!

GCSEs

For most higher education courses, you will also need certain qualifications at level 2 (GCSE or equivalent). English is almost a universal requirement and GCSE is preferred, although for mature applicants an equivalent may be acceptable. Some courses will also require a GCSE or evidence of competence in maths, and occasionally science, depending on the course content.

Work experience and other experiences

For some courses - usually vocational - you would not be considered without some work experience (paid or voluntary) or work shadowing. Examples include teaching,

medicine, social work and physiotherapy, but there are many others where this is a distinct advantage. You should check this out early on - if you are on a two year course at school or college you will ideally need to have work experience before the start of your second year, so that you can mention it on your application. The point of the work experience is to show that you can cope in the relevant environment, that you genuinely understand what is involved in the vocational area and career you are applying for, and that you have the commitment to follow it through.

For school and college students, extra-curricular activity can also be an advantage. It doesn't matter whether you are captain of a rugby team or play in a darts team, dance, breed hamsters, play in a band or are a karaoke star - the point is it shows you are a well-rounded and sociable person with some commitment to the things you enjoy.

Where can I study and how do I choose where to apply?

The majority of higher education courses are offered in universities, although Further Education Colleges also offer a range of higher education courses.

There are hundreds of higher education providers and thousands of courses throughout the country. Listed below are some of the things you might consider when making a choice.

a) Location

Some specialised courses may only be available at a few locations so there won't be much choice. However, most courses are available in a wide range of locations.

Some students want the experience of moving away from their home to study, and there are plenty of opportunities for this. However, increasingly students prefer to study in their local area, and for students in the Sheffield City-Region there are lots of places to study within easy daily travelling distance, in South Yorkshire, North Derbyshire and North Notts. Joining clubs and going to social events will ensure you still enjoy the full university experience, and you can always move into a shared house in your second or third year.

b) Institution size and type

Your overall student experience will vary according to the size of the higher education institution. A large university will have thousands of students and offer many opportunities for social and leisure activities, additional learning, facilities and services such as accommodation and job shops, and an active student union with organised social events, clubs and societies, plus opportunities for volunteering and work-related activity. Teaching is likely to be a combination of lectures (sometimes very large numbers of students) and seminars (class sized).

Higher education courses in a college have a much smaller number of students, most living locally. There are no large lectures, with most teaching taking place in class sized groups which suits some students better. Higher education students are usually in a minority and may or may not have separate studying and social facilities

from other college students. Student accommodation is not usually available.

University colleges are specialist higher education units run by colleges, and are somewhere between the two.

c) Grade differences

The grades required to get into courses don't necessarily reflect the quality of the course, although sometimes they do. More often they reflect the popularity of the course (a case of supply and demand) or the institution offering it, or even the location. Cities are always popular, small towns or those a little 'out of the way' can be less attractive to potential students, so may offer lower grades. Colleges may offer lower grades than universities.

d) League tables and guides

Several websites provide 'league tables' of universities and courses if you are interested, but treat these with caution and find out what they are measuring. Some focus on the reputation of the institutions for research - not necessarily the most important factor when choosing your first degree. Things which may be more relevant include teaching quality, facilities, employment prospects and so on. There are also some guides which tell you about the non-academic features of institutions such as transport, social life and accommodation, and you may also find these useful (Potter guide, PUSH guide, etc.). You can find these on-line or in careers libraries of colleges.

How do I apply for a higher education course?

Almost all applications for full time higher education courses are handled by UCAS. There is a clear process to follow, with deadlines for each stage identified. All the information you need is clearly set out on the UCAS website (www.ucas.com). If you need more help and advice, please contact your tutor. What you have to do for yourself is:

- be aware of the applications process and the deadlines
- research courses and providers carefully
- shortlist the courses you are interested in
- attend visits, open days and planning events
- complete your application in good time