

Researching Higher Education Courses

If you are considering applying for Higher Education through UCAS, UCAS Conservatoires or independent degree providers you will need to decide which subject, course type, and course provider is right for you. With more than 35,000 undergraduate courses on offer in the UK this will necessarily involve undertaking some research to narrow down all the options that are available to you.

UCAS

All applications to UK universities for full-time undergraduate courses are made through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). The UCAS application process varies depending on the type of institution you are applying for, the level of degree and how you are choosing to study. UCAS' online application procedure is called 'Apply' and is available on the UCAS website alongside details of all the courses available.

UCAS Conservatoires

Performing arts students can apply through UCAS Conservatoires to a separate list of institutions that specialise in practical performing arts training. Often having bespoke facilities, they help you experience what it's like to actually work in the industry.

Independent Degree Providers

Independent degree providers accept direct applications for higher education courses. These range from large-scale colleges and private universities to small scale providers offering courses in addition to their principle businesses. There is a high degree of subject specialisation such as business and administration and performing arts.

When choosing a course, you need to consider the following:

1. Subject Area
2. Course
3. Location

Subject Area

Before choosing a specific course, you need to be sure of the subject area you want to study. The subject is what you study, while the course is the area of that subject you would like to study, e.g. a Geology course falls within the wider subject area of Earth Sciences.

When choosing a subject area, it is important to consider:

- What do I enjoy, what am I interested in?
- What do I feel I can do well in?
- Can I meet the necessary entry requirements for the subject?
- Would this subject help me access my longer-term career goals?

Course

After you have selected your subject area you need to select a course.

It is important to consider:

1. Course Content
2. Course Opportunities
3. Course Qualification
4. Course Accreditation
5. Entry Requirements



1. Course Content

A small amount of research will quickly unearth the huge number of courses available.

For example, a search for 'Biology' could bring up 'Biological Sciences', 'Genetics', 'Zoology', 'Biotechnology', 'Microbiology', 'Human Biology', 'Natural Sciences', 'Sport and Exercise Science'

It is essential therefore, that you read course descriptions closely on individual university websites. While different universities have the same course names, each course can have entirely different modules and content, teaching and assessment methods and number of contact hours. Some courses can be very specialised whereas others are highly flexible.

For most undergraduate honours courses, you have to complete 120 credits per year. These credits can be made up of different modules, some will be compulsory but there may be flexibility to choose from a range of optional modules and therefore personalise your course.

University league tables may be helpful in providing insight into the strengths of a particular university overall, but they should be used with caution. Each league table use their own methodologies and systems of weighting. Perhaps the most impartial source of statistical analysis can be found at [discoveruni](#)

The most common degree courses last for 3 or 4 years, and are categorised as follows:

- **Single Degree** - studying 1 subject with possible "taster" modules in other subjects
- **Joint Degrees** - studying 2 subjects, generally in equal depth, although some universities allow you to "major" in one and study the second as a "minor"
- **Combined Degree**- studying 2 or 3 subjects, usually with the chance to specialise in the final year
- **Interdisciplinary Degree**- studying a number of subjects linked to a particular discipline e.g., Media Studies, Environmental Sciences
- **Foundation Degree**- vocational, practical courses lasting up to 2 years and often taught at a college, these courses usually have lower entry requirements but can lead to a 'top-up' year to gain a full degree
- **Foundation Years/Extended Degree** – an extra, initial year for applicants without the necessary entry requirements to access the standard degree course
- **Sandwich Degree** – vocational courses offering a year in industry

2. Course Opportunities

What extras does a course offer? Does it include work experience placements, guest lectures from industry professionals, a sandwich year or studying abroad? All this can add to your university experience and potentially better prepare you for life after studies.

3. Course Qualification

After finishing your undergraduate studies you'll graduate with one of these following degrees:

Bachelor of Arts (BA) Bachelor of Science (BSc) Bachelor of Education (Bed)
Bachelor of Law (LLB) Bachelor of Engineering (BEng)

Some subjects can be taught as either a BA or BSc, including Archaeology, Economics and Geography and the emphasis of the course will be reflected in the entry requirements.

4. Course Accreditation

An accredited course is one that has been approved by a professional body and detailed course information on university websites should indicate whether the course is accredited. Studying an accredited course is necessary if it leads to a professional qualification in the industry you plan to work in, for example, vocational undergraduate degree courses such as Accountancy, Engineering, Healthcare, Law and Teaching.

5. Entry Requirements

When choosing a course, look at the grade requirements and compare them with your predicted grades.

Some universities use the UCAS tariff while others only specify grades.

Be realistic with what you can achieve and as a general rule, select:

- One '*aspirational*' course with grade requirements that are higher than your predicted grades
- Three '*realistic*' courses that have the same entry requirements as your predicted grades
- One '*insurance*' course with grade requirements lower than your predicted grades

Location

When shortlisting university courses, it is also important to consider the universities themselves and the ones that most closely match your preferences regarding:

- Proximity to home
- City centre or campus location
- Clubs, societies and facilities
- Student support and access to specialist services
- Accommodation and cost of living

Studying in Scotland

Scottish degree programmes are different to those on offer in the rest of the UK and are designed to enable you to try different subject areas before specialising.

The structure of a typical four-year Scottish degree is as follows:

- 1st Year – study up to 3 different subjects from within the same faculty (e.g. arts, social science or science)
- 2nd Year – as 1st year, with the option to either continue with the same three subjects or drop one and take a 1st Year module in a different subject instead
- 3rd and 4th Years – study just one subject. This could be your original course choice or one of the ones you elected for in you 1st or 2nd Year

Essential Reading

[Discover Uni](#)

[UCAS Subject Guides](#)

[UCAS Tariff Calculator](#)

[The Complete University Guide](#)

[The Uni Guide](#)

[Prospects - how to choose the right degree](#)

[Going to university in Scotland](#)

[Future Learn Course - Next Steps to University](#)

Remember...

Be analytical - the most important thing is to consider **what you have learnt** from undertaking your research. Record your key learning outcomes regarding each course/university and then consider their relevance in your hierarchy of choice. This will enable you to make a truly informed decision on which course is right for you.

Help with your decision making

Try rating the decision-making criteria that are important to you when deciding on a course and university. The blank spaces at the bottom of the table allow you to add any additional criteria that are important to you.

Decision-making criteria	Rating				
	Not important	Not very important	No preference	Quite important	Very important
Location					
Interesting course content					
Academic reputation					
Employment rates					
Quality of academic facilities					
Opportunities for study abroad or work placement					
Accommodation					
Availability of financial support					
Opportunities available outside your studies (clubs and societies)					
Availability of part-time work					

Next, list the courses you are considering against the decision-making criteria that you have ranked as important or very important. Give each University and course a mark out of five, awarding the highest score (5) to those that fully meet your criteria and the lowest score (1) to those that don't (example below).

Decision-making criteria	Maths at University A	Maths and Statistics at University B	Maths at University C	Maths at University D	Maths at University E
Location					
Interesting course content					
Academic reputation					
Employment rates					
Quality of academic facilities					
Opportunities for study abroad or work placement					
Accommodation					
Availability of financial support					
Opportunities available outside your studies (clubs and societies)					
Availability of part-time work					
Score					

Try writing a **SMART Action Plan**. Choose a **specific** objective, ensure the result of your objective is **measurable**, make sure it is **appropriate/achievable**, check also that it is **realistic** and ensure a **time-restriction**.

Objective	Tasks	Help needed	Potential barriers to completing the task	Evidence of achieving the task	Completion or review date
<i>Example: I want to study a joint honours degree in French and Politics but do not know where to study it.</i>	<i>Research the universities 1st July that offer French and Politics</i>	<i>Use the UCAS website and its course finder Look at individual university websites Review subject league tables Use Discover Uni to compare courses</i>	<i>Not enough time to do this research whilst studying A Level content I do not know where to start</i>	<i>A list of universities that offer French and Politics</i>	

Please contact the Careers Department at careersstaff@staidans.co.uk if you would like individual information, advice and guidance – we are happy to help.

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