

Article: Higher Education - Deciding on a Course

Summary

This article looks at what to think about when you are choosing a higher education (HE) course. You will want to consider:

- the type of course that you'll study
- where you want to study
- what type of university or college you want to go to.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) courses are normally taken by students with A levels, an International Baccalaureate Diploma, Edexcel (BTEC) Nationals, a Cambridge Pre-U Diploma, an Access to Higher Education Diploma or an equivalent qualification.

Thousands of higher education courses are offered by hundreds of universities and colleges around the country. Despite the huge choice, choosing your higher education course needn't be a headache.

However, it is an important decision, which demands careful research and considerable thought. A number of factors will influence your decision.

What type of course would you like to study?

Higher education (HE) courses can be broadly divided between vocational (career-related), and non-vocational.

If you have already decided on a career, a vocational course could be the one for you. Vocational study can be broad, such as business studies, or job-specific, like medicine, nursing, dentistry or architecture. You might decide to study a Degree Apprenticeship, where you are employed in a full-time job, but also study towards a degree.

Some courses include a sandwich year in industry, or studying in another country, between the second and final year.

Non-vocational courses are more general, for example history, English or biology. These courses are appropriate for a large number of careers, where the ability to learn quickly and grasp new ideas is required. You could continue with a subject you have already studied, or decide to explore a new one.

It's possible to study a non-vocational course, and later apply for a postgraduate conversion course. This can be done in a variety of areas including law, accountancy and teaching. This route takes you longer to qualify.

Some courses can be studied part-time; contact universities and colleges directly for information about these.

The course content and teaching methods for courses with the same name can vary widely. It is important to find out as much as possible about individual courses to see if they will suit you. Check websites and prospectuses carefully.

Many universities run taster courses or summer schools, where you can find out more about some subjects.

Making a decision about the type of course you want to study is a big step forward. See the article Higher Education Courses for more information.

What type of educational establishment?

A university is not the only place where you can take a higher education (HE) course. Many colleges offer courses that are accredited by a university.

Alternatively, you could study at home through a distance learning course or a supported open learning course, with the Open University, for example.

Where do you want to study?

Where you study can make all the difference to your success on the course. Remember, you could be spending up to four years (or more) at the place you select. One way to help with your choice is to make a list of what is important to you.

You might want to consider the following:

- How far away from home do you want to be?
- Would you prefer a small college or large university?
- Do you want to live in a big city or would you prefer a more rural location?
- Would a campus institution (all the buildings on one site) appeal to you?
- If you choose a split-site institution, is transport provided?
- Are there relevant sporting, music or social facilities?
- Do you want to live in university halls of residence?
- If you do, how much accommodation is available, and how is it allocated?
- Would you prefer to have your meals provided (in a catered hall of residence), or live in a self-catering hall where you can cook for yourself?

Try to visit the places you are considering; universities and colleges have open days when you can look round and speak to current students.

You might also be able to attend exhibitions or conventions, where representatives of many universities and colleges are on hand to answer your questions.

Many universities run taster courses or summer schools, where you can find out what it's like to study there.

Can you satisfy the entry requirements?

The popularity and/or difficulty of the subject might determine the entry requirements that universities and colleges ask for. They sometimes increase the entry requirements of popular subjects to help select the candidates they believe will be most suited to the course.

If you haven't got the grades/predicted grades you need for the course you want, don't despair. There could be a similar course that your grades will qualify you for.

Think about the grades that you can realistically achieve. Are you the sort of person who needs to set themselves high goals in order to achieve them? Or does it suit you to set a lower goal, knowing that you'll try hard to beat it? These factors could influence your choice of course.

Other influencing factors

Overseas links

It might be important to you to choose a course that offers you the opportunity to spend time studying in another European country; check for institutions that take part in the Erasmus Programme.

If you want to study further away, look for institutions that have student exchange programmes with countries outside Europe.

Quality

Compare courses at different universities and colleges. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the quality of teaching for your subject? How satisfied have past students been?
- Are their courses accredited with relevant professional bodies?
- What are the career prospects for graduates of their courses?
- How important to you is it that there is research being carried out in the department?
- Could you get exemptions from professional exams by doing this course?
- What resources, such as a library, IT facilities, laboratories, design or music studios, are available to support your learning?

You can check and compare information about universities, colleges and courses on the Unistats website.

Flexibility

Find out how easy it would be to change your course if you discover that it's not for you.

At many universities and colleges, students are introduced to more than one subject in the first year of the course, and can make a final choice after sampling the subject.

Some courses allow you to add different modules from other subjects after the first year, to build a more personalised qualification.

Assessment methods

Different institutions use different methods to assess you. Some place the emphasis on exams, while others assess coursework and assignments. Find out what methods are used on the courses you are interested in.

This can be important, especially if you have done Edexcel (BTEC) Nationals or an Access to Higher Education Diploma, for example.

Your work could be assessed by any of the following methods:

- final examination only (rare nowadays)
- yearly exams
- continuous assessment
- coursework
- exams plus continuous assessment
- exams plus a project or dissertation
- continuous assessment plus a dissertation
- any combination of the above.

Costs

Another important factor is the total cost of your higher education. Universities and colleges can charge different amounts for their tuition fees, and it is important to check this out. You might also need to ask these questions:

- Are there extra costs involved in this course, for things such as field trips or equipment?
- Is the university or college situated in a high-cost area of the country, such as London?
- Are there any scholarships, grants or bursaries available to help with expenses?
- Is the accommodation located a long way from the campus, leading to higher travel costs?
- If you study for a Degree Apprenticeship then your employer will pay your tuition fees

Where to find information

It is essential to look at university and college websites before making a final decision on what, where and how you will study. Gather as much information as you can. Also, seek advice from teachers, personal advisers and the institutions you intend to apply to.

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is the UK central organisation through which applications are processed for entry to full-time higher education (HE) courses. There is information on full-time courses, and on how to apply for them, on the UCAS website.

Further Information

Contacts

- **UCAS**
Address: Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL52 3LZ
Tel: 0871 4680468
Email: enquiries@ucas.ac.uk
Website: www.ucas.ac.uk
- **Erasmus Plus**
Address: Bridgewater House, Manchester
Tel: 0161 9577755
Email: erasmus.enquiries@britishcouncil.org
Website: www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus

- **Higher Education Courses: Find and Apply**
UK government services and information
Website: www.gov.uk/higher-education-courses-find-and-apply
- **National Union of Students (NUS)**
Address: NUS HQ, 4th Floor 184-192 Drummond Street, London NW1 3HP
Tel: 0845 5210262
Email: nusuk@nus.org.uk
Website: www.nus.org.uk
- **Unistats**
Email: unistats@hefce.ac.uk
Website: unistats.direct.gov.uk
- **The Complete University Guide**
Choosing Your Degree Course & University
Website: www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/courses/choosing-a-course/
- **Push**
Independent guide to UK universities
Email: talks@push.co.uk
Website: www.push.co.uk
- **HEAP 2014: University Degree Course Offers**
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