

THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO UNIVERSITY APPLICATION



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Introduction

The prospect of your child going to university is very exciting. Attending university can offer them a great foundation for their future success and happiness; both in obtaining further qualifications and in providing a protected environment to transition from teenager to adult.

It's an exciting time for you too. Yes, it's only their hard work that can get them to university, but you've contributed along the way with love, support and encouragement. It can be a daunting time as well. There is pressure to make the right choices, a myriad of options available and, especially in the case of a first or last child leaving home, the likelihood of a whole different way of life, not only for them, but for you too.

Selecting the right university will be one of the most important decisions your child faces in shaping their future and you will want to help them every step of the way. The "right" university means the right university for them: one which offers courses they'd like to study; where they will fit in and feel comfortable; one that will stretch their abilities without breaking them; and one where they will feel safe and happy. The "right" university will differ from child to child – even within the same family. So how do you decide what is right? We'll guide you.

Of course, whilst going to university is first and foremost about getting a higher-level qualification, it offers much more than that. It's about learning to research independently, create professional relationships, develop lasting friendships, living without parental supervision, adopting fun and meaningful hobbies and interests. It's learning to be a grown-up: self-reliant, resourceful and confident.

Providing the information you need

The selection and application process can seem complicated, especially if you have not been to university yourself. If you have, that may have been some time ago and things have probably changed. There's plenty of great information online for students, but very little designed specifically for parents, so it can be quite complicated to track down the exact information you need.

That's why we've created this straightforward guide covering the application process, starting from what your child should consider in making good choices to what happens on results day once they've completed sixth form - and everything in between.

This includes step-by-step information on:

- What to look out for when considering different universities and courses;
- The UCAS application process;
- What to do on results day, whether predicted grades have been matched, surpassed or missed

With so much depending on it, the thought of applying to university can be stressful for parents and children alike. We believe that once you understand the process and timelines, this will eliminate much of the stress for you (and, in turn, your child) ensuring energy is focused in the most constructive way to get the best possible outcomes.

Our aim is to help you eliminate doubt and anxiety, so you can provide calm and informed support. This will empower you to offer more helpful guidance to your child, with the ultimate goal of helping them create a future to fulfil their potential and make themselves (and you!) happy.

Researching universities and courses should be an enjoyable experience, not a headache. Don't forget: your child has as much choice and influence in selecting the right university as the university has in selecting the right students.

Choosing the right university

Types of universities

Russell Group Universities

Some universities belong to the “Russell” Group. The name originates from informal meetings held in the Russell Hotel of 17 university heads who were keen to ensure their interests were represented to government. The group was incorporated in 2007 and there are currently 24 Russell universities, all of which have an excellent reputation for research, teaching and industry sector links. They are considered the top universities in the country, and certainly benefit from high levels of funding (they receive almost two-thirds of all research funds) and, given their strong reputation, entry requirements are likely to be high. Does obtaining a degree at a Russell university make a difference? No doubt, there’s a certain kudos attached, but other universities might offer more appropriate opportunities so try not to be biased

Important factors to consider

Teaching and learning

Most universities follow the academic year of schools, starting in September / October and finishing in June / July with three terms. Ancient Universities (such as Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh) have been established over many centuries and tend to offer traditional subjects (Maths, English, languages) taught in a traditional style. By contrast, newer universities (such as Loughborough, York and Suffolk) offer more vocational subjects taught using less traditional methods. Personal learning styles are important to consider. If your child excels when given lots of direction and little autonomy, a more traditional learning environment might help them achieve better results and vice-versa if they perform better when left largely to their own devices.

The university and its industry links

Try to find out about the university and its industry links. Strong ties with industry often indicate excellent internship and placement opportunities which is very attractive for post degree employment prospects, especially important if you do not have these links within your own families and contacts.

University size

Like secondary schools, universities can vary enormously in size and the advantages and drawbacks should be considered depending upon your child’s learning styles. Large universities offer a much wider subject choice, alongside greater social opportunities with an astonishing array of clubs that could give your child the chance to learn a wonderful new hobby that lasts a lifetime. Smaller universities cannot compete with this (especially specialist establishments); however, they may offer a greater sense of community and belonging.

Campus or city

The big question here is “to campus or not to campus”. The great advantage of campus universities is that everything is in one place – lectures, accommodation, clubs, laundries, shops etc. They are usually situated just outside or on the borders of larger towns – “a town within a town”. The impression can be that they are safer, offer less distractions and provide a stronger sense of community because, in the main, students tend to stay campus based. City universities offer the same facilities, but they are split up across the town so travelling (sometimes some distance) from one place to another is part

and parcel of the package. This provides a closer experience to life in the workplace for most people and it gives students a chance to become fully immersed in the city itself. Whilst approved accommodation may be offered in the first year or two, later in their degree students are often required to find their own accommodation independently. In some cases, universities won't offer accommodation in halls if the family home is within certain mileage, so it's worth checking the university website.

Proximity to home

Flying the nest is more appealing to some than others! This is an important consideration. Attending university is, for most students, the first time they've lived away from home. For some, this is exciting and appealing, for others it's traumatic and challenging. Of course, there are practical implications too. If the university is close to home, it may be possible to avoid accommodation costs, although continuing to live in the family home can dilute the university experience in many ways – although this can be combatted by signing up to plenty of clubs and socials. But as parents it will be different for you too! Your lifestyle will change if your child continues to live at home but is attending university rather than school. Is it important that your child can easily pop home at weekends or will they adjust favourably to only returning during holiday periods?

Rural or city based

Another consideration is whether your child prefers town or country living. A university's location could drive many of the social activities they offer, so if your child is happiest immersed in the countryside and loves trekking, mountain-climbing and cross-country, they could feel short-changed by being plunged into an urban setting and vice-versa.

If your child has a particular passion, it is worth checking out whether the university already has a group focused around this hobby or, if not, how easy it would be to set up. Don't consider it trivial to focus on pastimes, happiness is a primary driver for success, and a university's environment can contribute hugely.

Try to be neutral

The tough challenge here is putting aside your preferences as a parent and supporting your child in the choices that are right for them – particularly if they are polar opposites to your own. Don't forget, it's natural to feel protective of your brood and want to keep them close but university provides a good opportunity for them to fly the nest in a protected environment.

Open days

Most universities offer an “open day” for prospective students, including lectures and talks, as well as existing staff and students on hand to answer questions. Websites, literature and videos can all give an excellent sense of the university, but nothing beats a personal visit.

If you can, join your child on visits without taking control; go with them on open days to give them support and guidance (it can be daunting visiting a new place, much more so when you think it could hold the key to your future happiness) but give them some time alone if they need it.

Think beyond academics

Don't focus solely on the academic elements of the university. Check out halls of residence, social centres and sports facilities. If the university is town-based, spend time in the local area and give some thought to how it would feel living there for the next few years. It's not a lifelong commitment, but three-to-five years, especially for a late teenager, seems a long time. From a practical viewpoint, what looks like a hop, skip and a jump on the map could prove a deal-breaker when thinking of the practicalities of living in one part of town but learning in another.

Plan ahead

It is vital your child arrives prepared to get plenty of answers to whether the university can meet their needs. Ideally, being armed with lots of questions to ask during a visit gives a good basis for conversation and interaction on the day, which could help them stand out. However, if your child hasn't yet gained the confidence to do this, then they could contact a student representative ahead of the visit and get answers by email or set up a chat with a student while they're there. What's important is to get a good sense of the comprehensive opportunities available and whether they are offered in an environment that suits your child's personality to make the most of them.

Trust your child's instincts

No matter how appealing a course might be, if your child hates the feel of the university the minute they step in the door, it's highly unlikely that they will get either the qualifications or experience they deserve. What looks good in theory doesn't always match up in reality. Pay heed if they take an instant dislike to a place.

Make the most of any offers

Remember to check the university websites. Some offer vouchers towards the cost of travel to open days.

Preparing for an open day

To get the best value out of university open days, it's advisable to prepare in advance. Open days often include a variety of lectures, walking tours and presentations, so your child should check what's on offer and plan accordingly. In addition, they should make a list of questions that they want to ask each university so they can compare and contrast differences to help with their decision making. Which questions should they ask staff, which are better aimed at students, or should they ask the same questions to both?

Prepare questions in advance

Do not be afraid to ask questions. Open days provide the perfect opportunity to receive direct answers to questions that may be difficult to find online. Furthermore, answers to some questions may be different compared to the previous year, such as whether they would make exceptions to the entry

requirements stated on their website. Both you and your child should think of some questions in advance rather than thinking on the spot.

Speak with students

Whilst open days provide an opportunity to receive information on the degree course and the university itself, nothing beats hearing from someone with first-hand experience of what it is like to study there. It's a good idea for both of you to speak to current undergraduate students if the opportunity arises - ask them questions about teaching quality, societies, accommodation and the local area.

Walk and observe

Walk around the campus and university town or city. Try to encourage your child to get a good feel for the environment. Can they imagine themselves living there? Do the students look happy? Is it a friendly place to be?

The art of seduction

Universities take the opportunity of open days to showcase their most impressive facilities. Be mindful, what you are being shown likely represents the very best they have to offer. Don't let your child be totally seduced by this, they must make their decision based on plenty of other research too.

Don't stress if you can't attend

If you and your child are unable to make the official open day, then you could arrange a private viewing. Call the admissions team to arrange a suitable date and time to visit. Whilst you are likely to miss out on some of the lectures and presentations that are organised during an open day, you may still be able to speak with a member of staff from the relevant faculty.

Question ideas for an open day

- Will an applicant still be considered if they did not meet their predicted grades?
- Will an applicant still be considered if they did not meet the GCSE entry requirements stated on your website?
- What is the university looking for in a student's application / personal statement - is there anything they can do to increase their chances of being offered a place?
- How many hours of timetabled teaching does the university provide and what is the ratio between lecture and seminar teaching?
- What additional support does the university provide if a student finds certain parts of the course particularly challenging?
- Does the university provide any additional support for students with a particular learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia)?
- What does the university offer with regards to career support and guidance?
- What type of careers / jobs do students go on to have after graduating?
- Can a student take on part-time employment whilst studying?
- Does the university provide opportunities to study abroad / work in industry (or can you tell me more about these opportunities)?

Choosing the right course

Types of Undergraduate courses

Most university courses offer a three-year undergraduate programme, but some offer “sandwich” courses which last four years, one of which is spent in the workplace (which could be overseas). There’s also the opportunity to obtain certificates of education, diplomas, higher national diplomas and foundation degrees.

Bachelors

Usually three or four years long, these can be single subject, dual subject (dual or joint honours) or several subjects (combined honours). Typically there’s a quantity that everyone studies – the core – and then options to specialise by taking different modules. Some bachelors offer sandwich courses, which means an additional year in a work placement as part of the degree. In some cases there’s the option to convert the bachelors to masters by studying for an additional year.

Bachelor of Arts or Science?

The major difference between a Bachelor of Arts (BA) and a Bachelors of Science degree (BS or BSc) lies in the subject chosen for study (i.e. more science focused or arts focused). For some subjects, this classification may differ between universities, such as economics and psychology. In this case, a BSc in economics or psychology is normally more suitable for students with an aptitude for maths and scientific study compared to their BA equivalents.

Foundation years

This is a one-year study period that can count as the first year towards a degree or as a standalone course. Foundation years are designed to increase knowledge in specialised subjects required for a degree course and are usually taken if students didn’t meet the entry requirements of the university either because of poor grades or different subject combinations.

Diploma in Foundation Studies (art and design)

A route towards art and design courses allowing specialisation in a student’s specific area of art or design.

Foundation degrees

Not to be confused with foundation years, foundation degrees last two years and offer an alternative if a pupil hasn’t reached the grade for a degree course, doesn’t want to commit to three or more years at university, or prefers more vocational study. They can be “topped up” with a final year to equate to a bachelors degree.

Degree of bachelor level apprenticeship

This is a comparatively new university offering, allowing students taking an apprenticeship to gain a bachelors (or masters) qualification by both working and studying at university part time.

Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Diploma (HNDs)

The Certificate takes one year and is equivalent to a first year degree course, whilst the diploma takes two years and is equivalent to the first two years of a degree course. Both can be topped up to a full degree by extending the course or joining a degree course at a later stage. The benefit here is to be able to study for a degree in stages.

Researching the right course

With over 30,000 courses available the right course is out there – it just might be tricky to find it! There is plenty of information about university courses available so it's worth researching diligently before making choices, rather than students relying on "my teacher recommends it", "my parents took it", or "I like the university".

When to step back

This research is something that your child should undertake – not you on their behalf. Avoid the temptation to use this as an opportunity to investigate options you would have liked to take given the chance. It may be tough with the benefit of hindsight and experience, but try not to forget it's your child's life and their choices, not yours.

Finding focus

Thinking of favourite subject choices is a good way to narrow focus, but don't forget many of the subjects offered at degree level aren't covered in sixth form options, so don't let your child restrict themselves to only considering topics they've already studied. Of course, if they are already set on a certain career path, their choice of degree may be obvious, which can be helpful. If not, some thought and reflection on things they enjoy that might apply to the workplace can give direction so some research on jobs might help streamline options by providing guidance on routes into industry.

Too much choice?

If they are struggling with a starting point, investigating what's of interest to them is a good place to start. You think they spend too much time playing video games? How about a BA in Computer Games Design – it can be a lucrative business post-graduation. Not academic but loves sports? BA in Sports Management. A passion for understanding how things work? How about MEng(Hons) in Product Design Engineering? Always reading crime thrillers? Perhaps they'd enjoy a BA in Criminology.

Predicted grades

Your child should research courses with entry requirements that are closely aligned to their predicted grades, allowing for some aspirational and safe choices either side.

Useful Websites:

- <https://university.which.co.uk/>
- <https://www.unifrog.org/>

League Tables

National league tables

National league tables are published annually by the Complete University Guide, The Guardian and The Times / Sunday Times. They cover a range of factors including student satisfaction, entry standards, facilities and academic services amongst others and focus on full-time student experience (not part-time).

Well established universities have had a long time to hone their subject offerings and know how to perform well in league tables. By contrast, new universities do not have this advantage but often excel by offering new, innovative subjects which can prove more relevant to today's working environment. A variance of 20-30 places could indicate as little as a couple of points difference, so bear this in mind when considering where a university is ranked. It's also worth noting that universities that rank highly in national tables don't always rank well in international tables as the criteria applied are different. If you spot a big difference, it's worth visiting the university website directly, as they sometimes offer explanations - or you could call them.

Subject specific league tables

It's worth reviewing subject league tables to see how the chosen university delivers in the specific subject areas of interest. This is different from national league tables, which shows how a university performs overall. It's possible that a university may rank low on overall league tables, but be very strong and well-respected in a particular area of study (and vice versa). Also, check for professional accreditation by approved membership bodies if seeking out a professional degree – this is a good indicator of whether the course is highly regarded within industry and whether or not it's equally valued both within the UK and internationally.

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)

To assess the quality of teaching within a university, consider the TEF rating as decided by an independent expert panel including students, academics and employer representatives. Ratings awarded are gold, silver or bronze.

Useful website:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2019/jun/07/university-league-tables-2020>
- <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>
- <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/good-university-guide-in-full-tp6dzs7wn>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/blogs/what-tef-results-teaching-excellence-framework-2019#survey-answer>

Suggested starting points

There is plenty of information about university courses available, and whilst it's up to your child to do the research, as parents you can help guide them by checking that the courses they shortlist fit their personality. For example, a child that likes to be active and enjoys practical studies and getting involved is likely to do better on a course that has plenty of experiential learning rather than one that is largely based around lectures and seminars. Here are some suggestions for things to consider when deciding whether a course meets your child's needs:

Is your child academic or practical?

- Do they enjoy being in the classroom?
- Do they enjoy learning in a studio or outside?
- Do they enjoy writing essays and researching topics or prefer to make and produce things?

Which school subjects do they enjoy?

- Is there a particular part of a school subject they have enjoyed?
- Do they have a natural flair for a subject?
- If they enjoy more than one subject, are there any common themes?

What are your child's hobbies?

- Is your child particularly passionate about any music, sport or art related activities?
- Think about your child's personality traits
- Try to think outside the box - do they have a particular interest in current affairs? Gaming? Helping others?

Has your child expressed interest in a particular career?

Try to think of subjects that will help them pursue this career without narrowing their options too much if they change their mind later

University entry requirements

Different universities have different entry requirements, so it's important to check the university's website for details. Entry requirements are set out by the university to assess whether your child is suitable for a particular course.

Universities set their own standards

Subject combinations, types of qualification and subject grades needed for entry not only vary from university to university, but may also differ within the same university for different degrees. As a rule, universities are not flexible about their entry requirements (i.e. if they set minimum grades, your child will have to reach those grades); however, there are sometimes exceptions to rules (if your child can offer something special or if many students have failed to meet the entry requirements that year) so it's always worth speaking to admissions to see where they might flex requirements. Not all sixth form qualifications are considered equal by some universities. For example, some do not accept BTEC and others consider certain A Levels weightier than others.

Customised admissions tests

Some universities not only require a specified qualification grade at A Level (or minimum number of UCAS points) but they also have their own admissions tests / examinations to help them assess candidates like for like. Interviews may also form a critical part of the application process, but not for all universities. If applying for performing arts, auditions will also be likely to feature and other art subjects may require the development of a portfolio.

GCSEs could matter

Some universities may also specify certain GCSE results. With AS Levels no longer contributing to your child's final A Level grade, universities are increasingly looking at GCSE performance as a formal indicator of your child's academic ability.

UCAS tariff

In order to compare students as equitably as possible, UCAS offers a tariff (previously known as the "points system") whereby each sixth form qualification is awarded a certain number of points according to a combination of the time spent studying it and the grade achieved. This tariff is recognised nationally across the UK and universities use it to gauge the standard of achievement for sixth form students. It enables them to make comparisons between students who have studied different types of sixth form courses – i.e. National Highers, BTEC, A Levels etc.

Depending on the perceived course difficulty and the type of university, the minimum entry requirements will vary both from university to university and from course to course within the same university. Not all post sixth form establishments cite a UCAS tariff, they might specify grade requirements (i.e. x3 A Levels, minimum ABB), but it is the same thing. However, if they do cite a UCAS tariff (i.e. minimum 120 points), check out the tariff tables using the UCAS calculator to work out what qualification and grades will be needed to gain university entry.

A Level UCAS Points:

Grade	UCAS points
A*	56
A	48
B	40
C	32
D	24
E	16
U	0

T Level UCAS points:

Grade	UCAS points
A*	56
A	48
B	40
C	32
D	24
E	16
U	0

Useful Website:

- <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>

Understanding university websites

Key terms:

- Tuition fee loan: the loan to cover the annual cost of the university degree
- Maintenance loan: the loan to cover cost of living such as accommodation, food, course materials.

With university fees at almost £10,000 per year plus living costs on top, the prospect of committing to three or four years studying can seem as if the financial burden outweighs the benefits. But graduates earn more than school leavers and payback terms are linked to earnings (as explained later) so it can be a worthwhile investment.

Loan applications

Loan applications are made to the country of home residence, not the destination university through Student Finance. So, if your child lives in Scotland and is going to university in England, applications are made to Scotland. Student Finance is the organisation responsible for providing Tuition Fee Loans and Maintenance Loans to students at university. Applications must be made separately.

Timing

Applications for student finance can be made prior to receiving results and confirming a university offer. So, once application to UCAS has been completed, your child can make a provisional application for student finance whilst waiting on results. Loan applications must be made at least eight weeks before the course commences, otherwise payment may be delayed: don't forget this covers both types of loan - tuition fees and maintenance loans. We recommend encouraging your child to apply early to ensure loans are processed on time.

Tuition fees

The tuition fees (up to £9,250 per annum) are paid via Student Finance direct to the university (once the place has been accepted) and parental earnings do not impact this.

Maintenance loans

The maintenance loan is influenced by parental earnings. Simply put, the higher the family income, the less money granted:- parents will be expected to cover any shortfall. However, assessment is made on "residual" income – i.e. the money left over after debts and expenses have been paid (so not pre-tax earnings or even net income). This money is paid termly directly to the student, so make sure they know how to budget.

A different type of loan

Divorced / separated Parents

Where parents are separated or divorced, income is assessed on the parent with whom the child resides and (if applicable) their current partner (irrespective of whether or not that partner is responsible for the child). Income for the other biological parent is not assessed.

Repayments

Repayments are collected via Student Loans Company, who work alongside HMRC to collect repayments in line with earnings after the degree is complete.

Repayment terms are very generous, so avoid thinking that student loans are like conventional bank loans or even a mortgage. Importantly, no money is taken until earnings reach a certain threshold, they are paused if earnings drop below that threshold (maternity or redundancy), they are not evaluated on partner earnings and they are wiped clean after 30 years.

Other financing options

It's worth reviewing scholarships, grants and bursaries to see whether you child might qualify for additional income, particularly if they are studying for specialist degrees such as medical, social work or teaching.

Prepayments

Be careful with making pre-payments. Many students never repay the full amount of their loans before the amount is wiped clear. Trying to save on interest fees can prove a false economy. However, if they are likely to have continued employment at a high salary, then it might be worth making a prepayment. There are online calculators to help work this out.

Be aware!

Even with the maximum maintenance allowance, it may be necessary to supplement living costs, either through you contributing directly or your child getting work whilst studying:- or a combination of both!

Useful Websites:

- <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/student-loans-company>
- <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance-calculator>

Learning difficulties and entitlements

For students with a learning need, mental health issue or disability, there's the option to apply for dedicated funding to help with extra costs associated with their condition. It's called Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs).

This is in addition to student finance and there is no need to repay the money awarded. It may cover specialist equipment (i.e. a computer, voice recognition software, dictaphone), non-medical helpers (i.e. proof reader, note taker, sign interpreter), extra travel (i.e. the cost of taxis if you child can't take public transport) and / or accommodation contribution (i.e. if the bathroom needs to be adapted to meet your child's needs). It is applied to costs incurred directly because of undertaking the course (rather than costs that would be accumulated anyway) and costs incurred over and above that of those made by any student without a similar disadvantage.

The allowance is assessed not by household income but individual needs and, upon eligible application, it will be necessary to undergo a "study needs assessment" at an approved DSA centre (they will send you a link identifying local assessors). However, if a student is applying for both financial support and DSAs, they must complete their student loan application through Student Finance England first (as explained in Understanding Fees section) else they will not be able to make the online application.

Don't forget, if your child has an education and healthcare plan ("EHCP") this will lapse on higher education, but support will be available through the DSA.

Whilst notification of eligibility can take place relatively quickly, it can take a long time to process and complete all stages of the application (up to fourteen weeks), so do apply early. To qualify for DSAs, a student must be an undergraduate and studying for at least one year (this can be part time, depending on the "course intensity") and have written evidence from a qualified specialist about their condition.

The maximum allowances can be found online, however, very few students are entitled to the full benefit and most receive much less. Money is usually paid to the organisation providing the service although in some cases it may be paid to the student's bank account. Refunds and reimbursements will not be given for any costs incurred prior to the appropriate application and approval systems. If awarded the cost of a new computer, it will be necessary to contribute £200 towards this.

It's not necessary to inform the college or university if your child receives DSAs; however, it might be helpful for them to know to ensure your child gets all the support available. In addition, colleges and universities will have a disability adviser who will be able to give you help and advice about your child's entitlements.

Conditions that might qualify for DSA include:

- Social, emotional and mental health difficulties (such as ADD, ADHD); sighted or needing crutches);
- Sensory and / or physical needs (such as visual impairment or equipment to support a physical difficulty);
- Communication and interaction needs (such as difficulties with speech / language, Asperger's Syndrome, autism);
- Under the Equality Act 2010, some long-term health conditions are classified as disabilities (such as HIV, cancer, chronic heart disease).
- Cognition and learning difficulties (such as dyslexia or dyspraxia);

Keep Student Finance England updated about any changes in condition because it may mean an entitlement to more allowance.

Useful Website:

- <https://www.ucas.com/finance/additional-funding/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>
- <https://www.gov.uk/student-finance>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/student-loans-company>

The UCAS process

Understanding UCAS

All university applications are made through the University and Colleges Admissions Service (“UCAS”). There is a strict process and application procedure so it’s vital to know what information needs to be provided, in what format and when it needs to be submitted. Unlike schools that can sometimes flex deadlines for academic work, the UCAS deadlines are fixed and late applications may not be considered at all so it’s important to respect the timetable outlined.

Seven sections for completion:

1. Personal details
2. Additional information
3. Student finance
4. Choices
5. Education details
6. Personal statement
7. Employment

Plan ahead

The process itself is reasonably straightforward but much of the content requires considerable preparation before submission so this is absolutely not something to leave until the last minute. Applications that have been rushed and insufficiently thought-through are obvious and a slap-dash approach could jeopardise opportunities so ensure your child invests plenty of time in making the application.

Nominated access

Whilst your child needs to complete the application themselves, in the personal information section, there’s the option for them to add your name as “nominated access” which means that, with a few of their personal details, you will be able to track progress with their application directly either with UCAS or the universities they’ve applied to. This is very handy if they are travelling and out of contact, or not very good at keeping you updated on progress.

Facilitating information sharing

UCAS doesn't make applications for finance, but giving permission for them to share details on the application could speed up fund applications for either tuition or maintenance fees.

Choose wisely

Applications can be made for five choices this can be five versions of the same course at five different universities, or five different courses all at the same university or any combination thereof.

Usually, it doesn't make much sense to only apply to one university, as entry requirements are likely to be similar whatever the course and this could prevent your child going to university at all if they fail to make the minimum grades. In fact, some universities prefer applicants to be focused on one course, so multiple applications to the same university could indicate a lack of focus and count against the applicant.

In some cases, universities automatically offer similar alternatives if an applicant doesn't make their preferred choice, so using applications for multiple variations of a similar degree is a wasted opportunity.

Maintain relevance

As only one application can be made across multiple courses it's important to ensure that the overall application is relevant to each course tutor reading it.

For example, if applying for economics and politics at one university, but economics and philosophy at another, it might be wise to focus subject (course) related discussion on economics (the common denominator in both cases) and use references in the personal statement to indicate suitability to study politics and philosophy. If all of the text in the course section relates to economics and politics, a tutor offering a place for economics and philosophy might interpret that this is not their preferred option and dismiss their application accordingly.

Education details

Full education details must be included, and this includes results of any examinations taken, including:

- Examinations taken and what grades were awarded;
- Examinations taken but ungraded;
- Examinations taken but where results are yet to be released;
- Courses undertaken, even if they were not completed (an explanation of why they weren't completed should also be provided).

Concealing information here could prove costly later down the line if it's discovered the application was not wholly truthful: it could, in fact, result in offers being withdrawn.

Employment experience

Any paid employment experience should also be included. All the better if there's a direct link to the course application, but any experience is worthwhile and being able to distil and articulate why the experience was beneficial (in the personal statement) can make the difference between a typical application and a standout one. Students applying directly will need to include details of references, but if applications are made via school or college, the educational institution will do this for them.

Spreading risk

Try to encourage your child to apply for a range of courses with different entry requirements in case academic expectations are surpassed or not met. It is usually advised to apply for a mix of aspirational, realistic and safe university options. Applying to a range of universities with similar entry requirements may prove to be a costly error in receiving offers or not on results day.

Keep UCAS informed

Email is the first choice of communications for most universities, so your child should ensure their email accounts are set to receive bulk and / or large emails.

Don't forget to ensure that UCAS is notified straight away if personal details (address, email, telephone numbers) change during the application process. Failing to do this could mean important communications are missed.

Personal statement

As part of the university application, your child will need to submit a personal statement. Effectively, this is a short (4,000 characters or circa 500 words) advert that lets your child showcase why they would make a great student.

The complication arises in that only one personal statement can be submitted across all university applications and therefore it cannot be tailored to individual universities or courses: which does not mean they should not have been thoroughly researched before preparing the statement. The good news is the bulk of the statement should be focused around your child's strengths, achievements and ambitions.

Content for a personal statement isn't something that can be created overnight. It takes time to assimilate ideas, finesse them, so it's good to encourage them to start thinking about this well ahead of submission time. This doesn't necessarily mean a heavy-handed desk bound session but prompting them with questions on a regular basis to help them clarify why they like something or what makes an experience pleasant / unattractive for them will help consolidate thoughts and prompt an understanding of ways to describe clearly what they like and dislike and why.

Addressing different course choices

If they have chosen several different types of courses, they will need to focus on themes (i.e. creativity, communications, organisation, mechanics, research etc) rather than specifics (i.e. anything unique to one of the course titles). If possible, they should seek out the themes common to all the courses.

Notwithstanding this, every effort should be made to articulate their suitability and passion for their chosen courses, even if this means articulating in general terms rather than specifics depending on how different the areas of focus in each course may be.

It is worth noting that more academic universities will seek greater evidence of your child's passion for the subject versus their skillset, less academic universities will place more weight on skills.

Hobbies and interests

Their interests beyond the classroom are especially important, where they can demonstrate initiative for doing something that has not been prescribed, and interests and inspiration that they have discovered themselves. This is a key way to stand out from others because it clearly demonstrates their uniqueness. Voluntary experience can also be included.

Don't forget location. If all their chosen universities are city based whilst their hobbies are all country-related, they need to address this.

Being a joke may not be funny

Tempting though it may be to make lots of jokes, write in an unusual style, or exaggerate the truth in a bid to stand out from others, this is not the appropriate way forward. Notwithstanding the personal statement should reflect your child's personality, these pretensions should be avoided.

Demonstrating passion

With relatively few words allowed, it is essential that the university understands why this is the right course for your child. Wider reading and relevant work experience associated with their degree choice (even if it is for a day) will help illustrate their interest.

Setting the right tone

It is essential to write in clear English (it does not have to be flamboyant or elaborate but should articulate the meaning simply), use a sensible email address and focus on positives (what they do like and contribute, not what they don't like and want to avoid).

Like CVs, there are certain descriptors that can be over-used (creative, great communicator, diligent, willing to learn, team player, problem solver to name but a few). It's fine to use these expressions, but the focus should be on why this applies (and examples to prove or demonstrate) rather than listing them without qualification.

Sequence, paragraph order and a broad remit covering a variety of aspects of their personality are important. This is no time to be shy or secretive. Your child should share drafts to get feedback and input from a range of people that have unique insight into their different strengths.

The personal statement can be cut and paste from another source. To get a good statement, it will probably need to go through many iterations, so best not to type it directly onto the application form!

Getting personal experience

A key way to stand out from others is to gain some experience, either by volunteering, working or enjoying hobbies. It resonates all the more if they can show reflection on what they've learned from it and how it's impacted them. This has special merit if it's in a related area to subjects they're applying for:

- Someone applying for a medical degree might demonstrate a caring personality by volunteering at a local hospital, charity or hospice;
- Someone looking to get involved in a sports degree might help set up a jogging group for teenagers in a local park;
- Working in a shop over the weekend might offer all sorts of insights into customer relations, understanding consumer bias, appreciating the importance of customers being polite and respectful to staff etc;
- A passion for a certain hobby and how that has grown and developed over time, demonstrates commitment, enthusiasm, progress and self-growth.

If a gap year is planned, it's worth including an outline of how it is hoped this will expand their experience and knowledge in the personal statement.

How to support your child with their personal statement

DOs

- Start early - the personal statement will need a number of redrafts;
- Create a plan - encourage your child to make a list of all their achievements - academic, work-related, sport, music and art successes;
- Check the university websites to see what qualities and skills they want to see: an aptitude for maths? Creativity?
- Leave time for feedback - teachers, tutors, family members;
- Check for spelling and grammatical mistakes;
- Relate experience, study and hobbies to the course or to what university life entails;
- Write with passion and enthusiasm - can your child demonstrate wider reading? Additional courses completed? Work experience in a relevant field?

DON'Ts

- Plagiarise or copy any other source - UCAS will check for this and it may have an impact on your child's overall application;
- Exceed the 4000 character limit / 47 lines of text
- Mention a university or course by name (if your child is applying to different universities or for courses with different titles);
- Demonstrate uncertainty or excuse potential bad results;
- Try to be overly funny or waffle.

Tracking the application

Once the application is in, there isn't much to do other than sit back and wait. Different universities have different criteria on when they make their decisions and their timelines can vary, so responses to applications won't be made at the same time.

Most universities respond within a fortnight or so of receiving the application, but there are exceptions and a delay in response does not necessarily imply bad news. There are firm deadlines and, in the event that universities haven't responded by the appropriate deadline, their response is automatically deemed as a rejection. On this basis, it could well be worth telephoning them a few days ahead of the deadline if there has been no news to ensure there hasn't been an error in losing the application.

UCAS records progress and status through their online programme "track" which has a secure login. At present there is no app for phones.

Universities will make either a conditional offer (the application is accepted so long as the student achieves a certain level of grades when taking sixth form qualifications) or unconditional – the application is accepted and either the student has already met their minimum requirements (for example, if they have already taken their exams) or there are no pre-requisites notwithstanding exams have not yet been taken. Whilst an unconditional offer ahead of final examinations is good news for a child because it eliminates additional pressure ahead of exam time, it can be bad news for you (and them!) in that the incentive to work hard and achieve the best sixth form grades possible is no longer necessary.

However, it's worth remembering that whilst sixth form grades may no longer play a part in university entry with an unconditional offer, they will still be considered by future employers – especially if the grade of degree obtained was mediocre.

Once all the offers are in, it's decision time. Your child can only accept a maximum of two offers – one “first choice” (or firm) offer and, in the case this is conditional, an insurance offer in case they don't meet the entry requirements specified in their first choice. If their first choice is an unconditional offer, there is no need to accept other offers but this also means that they cannot opt for an insurance place or be entered into Clearing (unless they do much better than predicted and their results surpass expectations, in which case they can either accept the place offered or go for a different course through the UCAS “adjustment” process). Universities making any remaining offers must be notified that their offers have not been accepted.

Key terms:

- **Conditional offer:** An offer has been made, but your child must meet the requirements set out in the offer - usually exam grades.
- **Unconditional offer:** An offer has been made and your child's place has been confirmed regardless of exam performance. There may be some conditions attached to this type of offer, such as selecting the university as your child's first choice.
- **Invitation received:** Your child has been invited for an interview.
- **Unsuccessful:** Your child has not been successful. The reason will usually be shown in UCAS Track.

UCAS Extra

In the event that all universities / courses decline the application, there's an opportunity to apply through “Extra” for alternative universities, but this cannot be activated until all declines have been made official.

How it works

If your child is eligible for UCAS Extra, an “Add an Extra Choice” option will be displayed on their UCAS Track profile. Applicants can only apply to one university course at a time until an offer is made. Available courses can be found using the “UCAS course search” tool found on the UCAS website.

Once your child accepts a university offer on UCAS Track - they won't be able to accept an offer from anywhere else - so encourage them to think carefully about the decisions they make.

Try not to be discouraged

Keep your child's spirits up. Applying through Extra can be stressful and your child might not get a place on their first, second or even third attempt. If your child is unable to find a suitable university through Extra, then they can choose to apply through UCAS Clearing, which begins on 6 July 2021.

A second chance

Encourage your child to think carefully about why they were unsuccessful with their original choices. Consider whether the universities were appropriate and whether the course entry requirements truly reflected your child's academic potential. When applying through Extra, consider widening your child's search for the right university and course. Perhaps consider a more suitable variation of the degree subject they initially applied for.

Contact the university directly

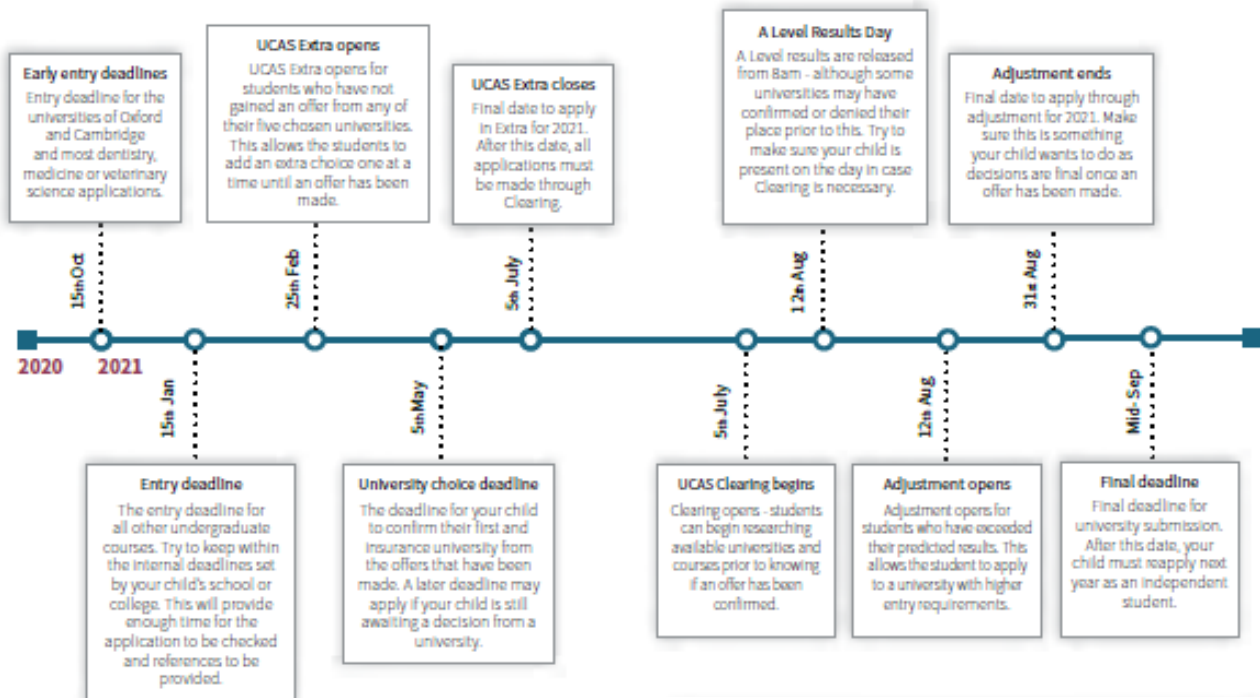
When applying to a university through UCAS Extra, it is worth noting that the university will have access to your child's original personal statement and their initial university and respective course choices. It is therefore recommended for your child to ring the university's admission team directly prior to applying through Extra, particularly if the course or university style is different to their original application. A brief conversation with the university may make the difference between receiving a place or not.

Summary

All university applications go through UCAS according to a prescribed format; however, there are still things your child can do to make their application stand out from others:

- Complete each of the seven sections carefully;
- Check for spelling errors and typos
- Include non-school activities, such as hobbies, volunteering and work experience, focusing on the impact they have had, to help demonstrate how your child is different from others;
- Don't rush the application and read it several times before submission;
- Keep contact details up to date and apply with plenty of time.

UCAS timetable



Other choices

It is important to understand that university isn't for everyone. Some children may know straight away, whilst for others it may only become apparent during the university application process. An increasingly popular alternative is apprenticeships and traineeships. Or there are school leaver programmes which give a direct route into employment and can result in further qualifications. If your child needs more time to figure out their next steps, a gap year can offer breathing space.

Apprenticeships:

Apprenticeships combine study at college or university with work. If your child knows what sort of job they might like to do, this provides an ideal opportunity to go straight into the workplace whilst still formally developing their skills and gaining a qualification. It's certainly not an easy option – holding down a full-time job (albeit with one or two days each week to attend university) and keeping up with studies can be tough. But with a salary, holiday entitlement and sick pay along with access to the university experience and no post qualification loan (their employer and the government fund all costs), it makes for an attractive proposition. Most apprenticeship last for about two to four years and the minimum wage is £3.90 per hour. There are entry requirements at four different levels, from the equivalent of five GCSE passes to the equivalent of a master's degree.

Traineeships

Traineeships are much shorter and last six weeks to six months. They are a great way to prepare for apprenticeships (if your child doesn't have the minimum entry requirements) or to get first-hand experience of what a job is like.

School leaver programmes

School leaver programmes offer opportunities to join the workplace straight after sixth form studies and commence skills development and career progression through experience as well as studying to obtain a nationally recognised qualification. Entry requirements vary from employer to employer.

Gap year / deferred entry

Taking a year out between school and university can provide the opportunity to find out a little bit more about personal preferences rather than being directed by schools, colleges (and parents!). It's also a good opportunity to find out how your child fares finding for themself.

A gap year can be taken while entry to university is being deferred, once a place has been accepted (allowing a year between leaving school and starting university), or if university is not the next step at all. Traditionally, this is a year spent travelling overseas, but it needn't focus exclusively on that. Volunteering and work experience can also be incorporated and inform your child's likes and dislikes, as well as giving them valuable first-hand experience in a variety of areas they may not have had chance to try out. However, for some a gap year can be distracting and, if not well-planned, could prove somewhat directionless, which is unlikely to be beneficial.

Some may want to enter the world of work straightaway or, if they haven't achieved the results they had hoped, they could always try retakes or other sixth-form subjects.

University reapplication

Should your child decide to reapply to university for any reason, be sure they save a copy of their UCAS application so they do not have to rewrite everything, as the original application is deleted from the central database each year.

Useful Websites:

- <https://www.unifrog.org/>
- <https://www.ucas.com/understanding-apprenticeships>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safer-adventure-travel-and-volunteering-overseas>
- <https://www.statravel.co.uk/>
- <https://www.gap360.com/>
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Final Words

You're bound to feel excited and proud about what your child's achieved as they embark on their first independent step towards adulthood by attending university. But it may be tinged with an element of sadness as you realise your parenting role is about to evolve into something different. Please don't forget your child still needs you very much - albeit in a different way.

Be there for them! Leaving schools and long-term friends to start a new life is exciting but it's emotional too. For your child, potentially everything is about to change. The life that has been so familiar to them (especially if they've been at the same school since Year 7) disappears. They have new teachers, a new place to live, new subjects to study in a different way from how they're used to studying, and a new peer group in which to find friends.

Even if they are not moving away to study, there's still much in their new life that will be different from before. In this sea of change, you are likely to be their only familiar anchor. Yes, they need space to adapt at their own pace, but they may also need to know you are still there for them and that there is some certainty and consistency in a fast-changing environment.