



UCAS Demystified

The UCAS (Universities and Colleges Application Service) is the process in the UK for applying to university and college courses.

It is an online service which you register for. You can make a single application (this is normally used by students where they have a specific university course to apply to, e.g. for a sponsored degree or specialist course recommended by an employer or where someone needs to remain in a particular geographical location and there is only one course available).

Most school leavers make multiple applications. You can apply for a maximum of 5 courses, but there are some limitations: only one course at either Oxford or Cambridge and only 4 medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine courses (you can have a fifth choice but for a different course).

The UCAS website has lots of advice and information including a [video](#) to help you make your application. The cost for the 2021 cycle is £20 for a single application and £26 for multiple applications.

Some of the information you need to provide and some is provided by your school. As a school leaver you will need to link your application to your school and you do this by using the school 'Buzzword' which your school will give you (this changes every year).

You provide your personal details and these must match any names or details used on your exam entries and official documentation like your birth certificate or passport.

Key Dates

May 2020

The apply system opens and you can begin to register and search for courses for 2021 entry.

Summer 2020

Researching courses

University courses fall broadly into two types, vocational (leads to a professional qualification or links to a career area) and academic subjects (many will be completely new and not taught in schools).

Vocational courses leading to professional qualifications deliver required theoretical content and practical skills to enable work in the profession at the end of the course and the degree will be accredited by a governing body. There will be differences in the way the courses at different universities are taught but not in the content and competencies.

When you search for academic subject courses it is important to look at the courses at different universities in-depth, for example, English is not the same at every institution. The course could be literature or language. Some courses have more analysis, some offer creative writing, others will focus on language structure and linguistics (the science of language). Literature can be lots of different genres: world literature or American Literature for example or English and American literature combined. You can

find studies to suit your very individual interests, so think about what you want to study, how much flexibility you want and then search for your 'ideal' course.

If you are considering a new subject then read around the subject and do a taster to make sure that you like it (see our experience and taster information sheet our [Resources Hub](#)). This year many of the tasters have been moved to online courses. This is especially important for those students signing up to longer courses like a 5/6-year engineering degrees.

Researching universities

Visiting universities is not possible at the moment but there are lots of virtual campus tours (see our information sheet), but Universities will be keen to get potential applicants onto their campuses as soon as the restrictions are lifted. Choosing where to study is more than just who offers the course. Reputation may be important and there are many different ranking systems

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk>

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2019/jun/07/university-league-tables-2020>

Entry requirements (more than grades)

Grades

There are several ways that universities make offers to students, some make alphabetical offers (A levels and BTEC) and points for the IB. They may stipulate grades/points in individual subjects. Some make numerical grade offers based on the [UCAS tariff](#) and there is a [tariff calculator](#) on the UCAS website

Lots of qualifications are given tariff points but many are not, for example, there are no points for GCSEs or D of E.

Have a conversation with your teachers to get an idea of the grades that will be predicted in each of your subjects.

Work experience

Work experience can be helpful (or in some cases, essential). The challenge at the moment is finding virtual work experience and making sure that you get a realistic idea about what is involved in a particular career. The medical courses (medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine) typically require evidence of work experience as an entry requirement. This is to make sure a student is suited to practice in the career field. The other issue is that, as they are early entry courses, you may not be able to fit in much more work experience before your application goes in, so check the university websites where there is information about how to deal with this. We particularly like the information provided by [Birmingham University](#) about this.

Additional tests

Some courses require additional tests, so check and allow time to register for and complete them.

Interviews

Some courses/universities interview applicants; be prepared and make sure you know if that is likely to be the case with your courses or universities. Also find out why interviews are being used - some are designed to encourage you to attend the university, others to select applicants for offers.

Begin your application

To begin filling out the UCAS online application, you will need to enter your personal information and all your qualifications such as GCSEs with the exam board and syllabus codes, plus anything else that you have taken and have the results for. Your predicted grades for Upper Sixth exams will be input by your school.

If you have decided on your course then consider starting your personal statement. This is the 4000 character document which the universities receive to help them decide whether to make you an offer (some universities use this more than others) but to make a strong application across several institutions you should assume that it will be important to some of your choices if not all.

Early September 2020

Check what your predicted grades will be and do your final course and university selection.

UCAS opens and you can apply. In addition to your personal information you need to select the course codes and institution codes for the courses you wish to apply for.

You need to upload your personal statement (which you will have edited with the help of your teachers and tutor and other staff involved in the UCAS process at school).

In addition to your personal statement, your school will add a 4000-character reference to your UCAS application. This can be a really useful way of communicating information that you would like the universities to know about you. This could be any amazing achievements or perhaps extenuating circumstances. Make sure you have a conversation with your school about what is going into your reference.

You will need to specify if you are intending to start in 2021 – straight from school or whether you are applying for deferred entry in 2022 – after a gap year. You can also ask to defer your place later in the process if you change your mind but you will need to get universities' permission to do this.

Before your application goes to UCAS it will be checked by your school and they will let you know that it is ok and that you can press send. At this point you will need to make your payment.

Choosing your courses and institution should be based on the research that you have done. Make sure you apply for a range of entry requirements, ideally one or two aspirational courses; one or two that match your predicted grades and one or two with slightly lower entry requirements (by one or two grades, so ABB goes to ABC or BBB or BBC). You do not need to apply to 5 courses in one go, you can add extra courses by logging into Track later. You also do not have to apply to the same course at all universities (you may wish to submit an additional personal statement for the different course(s)). You can apply to more than one course at a university and it is worth checking to see what the individual university policy is about double entries as some will shunt applications to a more relevant course while others will welcome a double application.

BE AWARE universities can make offers very quickly and so the earlier your application goes in the faster you may get offers! Two systems generally operate 1) offers are made when applications are received 2) 'gathered field' offers are made to all applicants at the same time but only when all applications have been gathered, usually after the January deadline date. These are not university-wide policies but department decisions, so don't worry if your friends are getting offers for different courses but you have not received anything yet.

1 October

Deadline application for music courses at Conservatoires.

15 October

Early application deadline, for Oxbridge (see our information sheet making a successful Oxbridge application), medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine (school deadlines will be earlier).

15 January

Deadline for most UK universities/Conservatoire courses. If you submit your application by this date you should receive the same consideration as everyone else who has applied. For those who have held back one or two slots on their UCAS application, you may wish to add additional choices. You can hold back to see which courses are still recruiting when Extra opens but some courses will close now because they have enough applicants.

25 February

Extra opens – this is when universities that are still recruiting to their courses can declare that they have vacancies. It is designed to help students who have been rejected by all their courses. It allows them to make another application and additional applications are done one at a time. (You are normally limited to 5 applications in a cycle). Some students use Extra to make an application to a different course because they have changed their mind. You can't hold any offers or have any outstanding decisions to make - if you want to apply to a different course you will need to reject your offers/applications to do so. This means that you will only hold one offer and will not have an insurance option. It may be worth contacting a university that has made you an offer to see if they would transfer you to a different course. You do not need to wait for Extra to open to do this - so if you change your mind speak to your universities to see what they can do. If you have not made an application already, then you can make a late application, so a full application to 5 courses, you can check and see if the courses are still recruiting through extra and you can contact universities and courses to see if they will take a late application before you submit.

31 March

Deadline for universities to give you their decision for on-time applications. Most people will hear by the 31 March but don't worry if you haven't. The early applicants - the medics, dentists and vets - are often the last to hear (Oxbridge offers are made earlier). If you have not heard from all your courses your deadline to make your choices will be extended.

6 May

Decision deadline provided you have received all your offers/rejections. You also have the option to make your decisions earlier if you prefer. You can decide to confirm a conditional firm choice (CF) and an insurance (CI). If you have an unconditional offer, it will show as unconditional firm (UF) and an unconditional insurance will show as (UI). Your insurance course should have a lower entry requirement than your firm first choice. If your first choice is the lowest offer you have then you do not need to have an insurance, as if you have failed to make the grades of your lowest offer you will have failed to meet the grades of the higher offers. If you have an unconditional firm you will not have an insurance as you have already met the terms of your offer.

If you do not meet this deadline your offers will disappear! (Provided you have all your decisions). They will no longer be on your UCAS Track and you will need to go through a whole level of pain to get them reinstated – and they should be, but it is much easier to meet the deadline!

If you change your mind after you have submitted your choices (in the first two weeks) contact UCAS as they will be able to help you change your selections.

4 June

Final date for universities to give decision through the normal application process.

18 June

Deadline for applicant decisions through the normal applications process.

30 June

All new UCAS applications will go straight to Clearing.

5 July

Extra Closes, you can still make an application if you have not used all your choices or if you want to make a late application but nothing more through extra.

6 July

Clearing opens. Clearing is the process where you can look for a vacancy if you have failed to meet the terms of your offers and your university are not going to accept you. You cannot enter Clearing until you have your results, so for IB students whose results come out on the 6th July it is open but for A level students entering Clearing is on 12th August when results come out.

Every year a significant number of students are accepted by their university even if they have not achieved the offer. However, universities are not under any obligation to do this. Universities receive your results about 5 days before you and they will have been looking at their numbers and quotas. They will want to run full courses, so there will be a good deal of pressure on them to adopt more 'flexible' grade policies. The lowest grades will be available through Clearing and universities will be keen to take students from oversubscribed courses that have failed to meet their offer onto other courses that may still have vacancies.

You will know if your place has been confirmed by logging into Track and if it has been it will show as UF (unconditional firm). You may find you have been rejected from your CF, and your insurance may show as UF or you may have been rejected from both of your options in which case you will be in Clearing. If you are still showing CF or CI that means that your university has not decided whether they will be taking you, you are still under consideration. If this happens you need to speak to your university to find out what is happening. You can decline your place once it becomes unconditional and put yourself into Clearing but make sure you get some advice before doing this.

Many students will choose to change their course or university through Clearing and we see a wide range of universities and courses recruiting through Clearing every year. Anyone can use Clearing regardless of whether they have got their place or not and many do. However, there can be some issues for these students with getting accommodation and some find making big changes to their plans can be very challenging - so think about what works best for you.

Results day

If you have met the terms of your offer, your university will have to take you, even if they are over-subscribed. They may try and persuade you to take a gap year and come the following year or to transfer to a different course, but you do not have to do either of these. Meeting the terms of your offer is the only way that you can guarantee your place!

12 August

Adjustment

For students who have exceeded the terms of their offer by achieving higher grades than expected, Adjustment allows students to negotiate a place on a higher entry requirement course. You do not have to let your UF place go whilst you do this.

Finally

UCAS exists to help you make your applications easily and it is designed to be as flexible and customer-focused as possible. There is a lot of information and guidance on their website, including videos and FAQs. Everyone understands that you are making very big decisions and that these may change as you gain more knowledge and experience. Nobody wants to see you go to the wrong university or do the wrong course and everyone is going to do the best they can to help you at every stage.

If you get it wrong – please tell someone and get some help to change your choices. There is nothing good about starting a course and dropping out because you changed your mind but didn't think you could do anything about it. If you start a course and hate it, speak to someone, get some help and do it quickly.

Don't feel pressured to make decisions that do not suit you, lots of people do not go university straight from school/ever and there are lots of very good work-based training options including some very interesting degree apprenticeships that may be a better fit for you.

University has lots to offer lots of people and for many, it offers a fantastic experience, making friends for life, gaining great life experiences as well as the chance to grow and discover who you are and study the things that you are passionate about for 3, 4, 5, 6 years maybe longer. So, do your research, choose well and make it the best years you possibly can.

FutureSmart Careers

April 2020