



Choosing the **right** course at the **right** university

Advice from a careers adviser

When you first start looking at higher education, you soon realise that there is a vast array of courses on offer – over 37,000 courses at around 400 providers. There really is something to suit everyone, which can make choosing the right course at the right university seem pretty daunting.

We all have different interests, motivations, and ways we prefer to learn that will influence our ultimate choice. No doubt you will receive different advice and views from friends, family, and teachers. But it's you that will be spending several years of your life in higher education, so it's important that you research the options carefully and try to balance all these views to find the one that is right for you.

We've asked an experienced careers adviser to suggest the key questions you need to consider and to provide advice to help guide your research and decision-making.

Choosing the course

What does the course cover?

While this sounds obvious, it's worth remembering that there is no national curriculum at higher education level. The particular specialist interests and expertise of lecturers will influence course content. So courses with the same title may be very different.

- If you have particular areas you wish to study, you need to look carefully at both the core course content and range of optional studies or modules available. The percentage of optional topics you can take will vary at every university.

- Don't forget that it can also be possible to mix your studies across two separate courses (joint honours degree) or more (combined honours).
- If you are looking to go into certain professions such as law, engineering, or architecture, you should check whether or not the course gives you accreditation towards professional status.

How is the course taught?

Most courses are taught through a combination of lectures, seminars, tutorials, and practicals. There is also a big emphasis on self-directed research and study. The split between formal teaching and own research can vary significantly between universities. For instance, here are some statistics from Unistats for a random sample of universities:

Course subject area	% time in lectures / seminars – ranges from	
Business	12%	44%
Engineering	19%	36%
History	12%	26%
Law	14%	39%
Physics	20%	45%
Psychology	13%	28%

- It's worth thinking about your preferred learning style and how you learn best. For example, are you someone who prefers a high level of structured teaching, or would you prefer more time completing your own research? The answer to this may reflect how easy or difficult you find it to motivate yourself to study outside of the lecture hall!

How is the course assessed?

Consider how you score your best marks. Are you an 'exams person' or do you achieve your best marks through producing coursework? Universities can use a whole range of assessment methods including exams, assignments, dissertations, presentations (individual or in groups), practical assessments, and project work.

- Some people perform better in certain types of assessment than others and this might be something to consider when choosing your course.
- The proportion of marks that contribute to your overall grade from different assessment methods can vary considerably. For example, the table below uses Unistats information (see footnote) and shows information for a selection of courses / subjects across a range of universities.

Course subject area	Lowest % coursework	Highest percentage coursework
Computing	47%	91%
Engineering	10%	74%
English	34%	86%
Law	16%	60%
Physics	22%	72%
French	21%	82%

What links does the course / department have with employers?

This naturally varies depending on the type of course, for instance, you might expect an engineering course to have far more links than a course in philosophy. However, some departments have much better links than others and if you have a particular career in mind, this aspect may be important.

- Check out what opportunities might exist for real practical experience and work placements while on the course.
- Don't forget, certain courses also offer a sandwich year where you can work in industry or study abroad for a year.

What do graduates do after their course?

It can be interesting to find out what graduates have gone on to do after their course – how many went into employment, postgraduate study, or were unemployed six months after the course. All universities collect 'destination statistics', so this is something you can ask about at an open day.

Choosing the university or college

Which is the 'best' university / course?

This is a common question and one that can be answered in different ways depending on how you wish to define the word 'best'. The reality is no one university is best for every student. For some, 'best' is measured by:

- quality assurance reports on universities (see [Quality Assurance Agency for HE](#))
- student satisfaction rates (you can check this out using the [Unistats website](#))
- the ratio of applicants to places
- entry requirements
- league tables that rank course providers – make sure you check the sources though, as some are biased (The Guardian, The Times, and The Complete University Guide are some of the more impartial places to look)

¹Unistats is the official website for comparing UK higher education course data. It includes official data for undergraduate courses on each university and college's satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey, jobs and salaries after study and other key information for prospective students.

What type of university do I want to attend?

It's worth spending some time thinking about the type of learning environment that you think would make you feel most comfortable. After all, you may be there for several years. The look and feel of universities can vary enormously and this can be influenced by the following factors:

- **Style** – from those with a more traditional feel with a focus on subject-based courses and research, to more modern universities that generally have a greater focus on vocational style courses, may have lower entry requirements, or those with a higher proportion of mature and part-time students.
- **Location** – some universities are located in large cities such as Manchester or London, whereas others are based in smaller towns or on the outskirts of urban centres. This can have a major impact on your environment and lifestyle. It's also worth remembering that universities can have multiple sites spread across an area, so always check where your course will be based!
- **Size** – the largest universities can have more than 20,000 students, while some of the smallest have several thousand students.
- **Culture and facilities** – universities can have very different cultures, influenced by the diversity of students who attend. Apart from subject specialist facilities, many may also offer particular sports or other facilities that you could benefit from.

How much do I want to spend on living expenses?

Costs such as accommodation, transport, and food can vary enormously depending on where you are living around the UK. For example, it is more expensive to live in large cities such as London. A key consideration is how far away you want to live from home. Most university websites provide information about the costs of living. Also look at [UCAS' regional guides](#) and use the [UCAS budget calculator tool](#).

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Other resources:

- Tips from students and questions to ask'
- How higher education is different from school or college
- I want to go on to higher education but...
- Higher education pros and cons