Choosing a course and university

If you have a clear career path in mind, it’s worth starting to research the best courses and routes into that ideal job.

You should bear in mind that some professions, like medicine, physiotherapy and law, are very competitive, so to maximise your chances of getting onto the course you want it is advisable to seek advice now about any subject criteria they may stipulate from GCSE upwards.

Your careers library at school and your local careers centre should have information on particular employers and professions, and can give you advice about how best to apply for them.
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Which course?
For some students, their choice of degree subject is influenced by their future career plans. If you have a particular job in mind, do some careful research to make sure that you choose an appropriate course. Remember that many graduate employers are simply looking for people with a degree in any subject area.

Many students have no clear career plans at this stage, and decide to continue with a subject that they have particularly enjoyed at school or college.

If you find that there is simply too much choice and you can’t narrow your choices down to one subject – don’t panic! Universities will also offer a range of combined subject degrees where you can study two or three subjects at the same time.

University degree courses can be very specialised however, and even degrees with the same title can vary a great deal in their content. You should look carefully at all the information you can find about a particular course or department to make sure that they offer the courses and modules of most interest to you.

Make sure that you also find out about the assessment methods and choose a course that suits the way you study and learn the best.

Higher education also offers you a unique opportunity to study something completely new such as Film and Television Studies, Civil Engineering or Textile Design.

Use the UCAS Directory to find out more about the full range of new courses available to you.

Which institution?
There is a huge range of higher education institutions to choose from and you need to consider what sort of place you will like the best. A few questions that you might consider when you start to make up your mind are:

Type of institution?
‘Old’ universities, ‘New’ universities, Colleges of Higher Education or specialist colleges e.g. performing arts, art and design or agricultural.

Large or small?
Higher education institutions vary in size from large, city-based universities with around 50,000 students to smaller, more specialised colleges with 1,000 students. What sort of institution would you be happiest in?

City or campus?
Think about whether you would enjoy living in the heart of a large, vibrant city like Leeds or Newcastle, or whether you would prefer the convenience, and community atmosphere, of a campus university like Nottingham or York, or one within a more rural setting, such as Lancaster.

Near or far?
Think about how close you would like to be to your family and friends, and how easy it would be to travel back and see them.

Special facilities?
Do you have any particular talent for music or sport that you would like to pursue, or a special interest that you would like to be able to follow at university? If so, make sure that the institutions you select have the facilities to support this.

Useful resources
We’ve listed some resources here which are available for you to have a look at when making your choices.

General Guides
- The UCAS Directory - lists all courses offered and gives an indication of entry requirements
- Brian Heap’s Degree Course Offers
- Virgin Alternative Guide to British Universities
- PUSH Guide to Which University?
- UCAS website - includes a useful Course Finder

University-specific guides
University prospectuses, course leaflets and websites are universally available and contain lots of essential information about course content, entry requirements and student life. Some universities also have videos, DVD’s and CD ROMs. You can check these sources in your careers library or get your own copy from a higher education fair, or directly from the university.

Higher education conventions
Attend your local higher education convention as this is your chance to talk to representatives from most of the UK’s higher education institutions, collect current prospectuses and to find out more about the courses that interest you (conventions are generally held between March - July).

University or college visits
One of the most valuable things you can do when considering which institution to choose is to visit the university or college for yourself so that you can gain your own impression of it. You will have opportunities to visit a university as they all organise pre-application open days (usually during March - October) and also either an interview day or post-offer visit day (held after you have made an application).