



Your Options

A guide to choosing your university and degree programme.



What should you consider when picking a university and a degree?

Introduction

Your experience of university will differ greatly depending on where you choose to study. The size of the university, and its location, will influence your life and future opportunities. University may seem a long way off when you're in Year 11 but it won't be long before you start researching degrees and drafting personal statements. It's a big choice, so it's worth starting to think about it now. In this guide we'll look at the various factors that you should consider when choosing what to study and where.

Reputation

Every year, university league tables are published to compare institutions based on factors such as research, teaching, student experience and graduate destinations. Higher ranking institutions are often more competitive to get into and may have higher entry criteria. Many of the highest ranked universities are in 'the Russell Group', an organisation that represents twenty-four institutions with a strong research focus and distinguished reputation.

However the picture is not so simple when you start to breakdown what is meant by 'reputation'. A university with a relatively low rank overall may have established industry links and excellent progression for its graduates into highly competitive careers.

Similarly individual university departments build their reputation by specialising in certain areas, so entry onto certain degree programmes may be highly competitive even if the university does not rank highly overall.

Different league tables prioritise different factors and many assess universities on the 'student experience' which covers things like student satisfaction, future career destinations and pastoral support.

You should take all of these things into consideration when you're choosing a university. Examine the league tables, find out how the different criteria are ranked and look up the individual subjects you may be interested in studying.

Degree Content

Compared to schools, universities have a lot more freedom to determine the content of their courses. Modules often reflect the research interests of the university and the expertise of their staff, so the content of the same degree could differ greatly from university to university.

Let's take history as an example. One university history department may be a leading centre for the study of medieval Europe so its degree content will reflect this knowledge and expertise. But an history programme at a department that specialises in modern Asia will focus on different periods and cultures.

The same goes for every other subject, so when you're researching degrees make sure you look at the online prospectus and the department websites where you will find detailed breakdowns of the programme and your different options.



Teaching and Learning

At school your timetables tend to be full and all students spend the same amount of time in the classroom. At university, things can be very different. The style of teaching, teaching methods and contact hours can vary depending on the institution and subject.

Students studying for science degrees will tend to have more timetabled hours than those studying a humanities degree. This is because much of the teaching takes place in labs and you will need access to equipment. You may look at a humanities degree and be surprised to see that you only have a few hours of lectures per week! But this is because you are expected to spend a significant amount of time reading and doing your own research every week.

Teaching methods vary too. Traditionally universities employ 'lecture' style teaching in which you will be taught with a large number of other students with the focus on the lecturer. There will be little student participation aside from note-taking and asking questions. Lectures are supported by seminars which are smaller, more discussion-focused classes that encourage you to interact with other students and academic staff. Depending on the subject, you may find yourself in a lab or doing fieldwork.

This can be a big departure from what people are used to at school, so some universities promote themselves as being more 'student-focused' and similar to schools in their teaching methods. Others will be a bit more hands-off and encourage you to take more responsibility. When picking where to apply you should think about which approach you may prefer and find out what universities offer.

Progression

Whether you already have a clear idea of what you want to do for a career or are unsure and want to keep your options open, your

prospects beyond university are an important thing to consider.

As mentioned in the 'Reputation' section, graduate 'destinations' (where students go, what jobs they get and how much money they earn) impact a university's league table rank. When researching a university, look at how highly it is ranked based on graduate progression statistics.

When researching your degree, look for opportunities that might enhance your profile when in future.. This could include something like the option to study abroad or whether the course offers work placements through industrial partnerships. Things like this can really help you stand out when applying for jobs or further study.

Your prospective university should have a dedicated careers service. Take a look at what they offer and ask about the support available at fairs and open days.

Location

The location of a university is probably going to be the single biggest factor in shaping your experience of higher education. Do you see yourself living at the heart of a teeming metropolis, or would you prefer the leafy quads and cobbled streets of a small university town?

Universities tend to be categorised as either 'campus' or 'city'. A campus university tends to be centralised in one place and located on the outskirts of a town. Everything you need, from the libraries, the student union to accommodation are within easy reach of each other. In a city the university is embedded within the wider town and may be spread out across a larger area.

There is a third category too: the collegiate universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Durham. These universities combine elements of a campus and a city university. They are



divided up into separate self-contained colleges that are similar to 'mini-campuses' that are within the wider town.

It may be hard to judge from just the internet or a university prospectus, so if possible, visit your prospective universities in person. This will help you get a feel for the place and picture what it might be like to live there.

Cost of Living

Student finance and the cost of living can seem a daunting prospect. But there's a lot of support out there in the form of loans and bursaries. Where you choose to study can have cost implications so it's important to know what your options are.

Will you stay at home or move out? If staying home is an option then that will help you save money, but it will also limit your options on what to study, where to study and what your student experience will be like. If you move away to a different city and live in halls then accommodation will be your single biggest cost, usually followed by food and transport. When researching a university, check out its accommodation options and costs.

Your cost of living can be influenced by location too. A campus university in a small town will be a cheaper place to live than central London. But remember that you are entitled to loan support for your fees and living costs, and that more money is available if you live in a more expensive city so this does not have to be a deciding factor.

Depending on your circumstances, different universities or courses may offer bursaries to support your studies. Bursaries differ from loans in that they do not need to be paid back. These bursaries may exist to attract a student just like you, so make sure you research what is available.

Next Steps

As you can see, there is a lot to think about when choosing a university and a course. To help you make a start, try the following:

- Where possible, attend university open days in person. This will help you get a better idea of what the institution and course will be like. If in-person visits are not possible then many universities will run virtual open days.
- Speak to friends, family and teachers who have attended university. Your teachers will almost certainly have studied at university – ask them how they made their choice and if there's anything they would have done differently.
- Read university prospectuses but also explore their website and those of the department you're interested attending. What modules do they offer? What are their research interests?
- Research student finance options early so that you know what help is available. UCL has a useful webpage that explains everything for you:
 - www.ucl.ac.uk/scholarships/funding-students-undergraduate-courses
- Look at a variety of university league tables, but remember to break down the rankings by subject and student experience.
 - www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings

