

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK

Adapted from:

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Pre-reading questions

- 1. Why is higher education important for a good career?*
- 2. Who should pay for university fees, the student's family or the government?*
- 3. Why do some people leave university before completing their course?*
- 4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the U.K. university entrance system?*

1. In the United Kingdom, higher education (university education) is very important for somebody if they wish to have a good career. Sometimes it's the student's idea to go to university, or it can be at the insistence of nagging parents. But sometimes it's because the student feels he needs a job like he needs a hole in the head, and university is a cushy alternative for them to doss around instead. Like in the Czech Republic, students usually go straight to university after they have completed their further education (A' levels). But unlike the Czech system, it usually isn't necessary to do an entrance exam (unless they want to study at somewhere prestigious like Cambridge or Oxford, or some more difficult subjects such as medicine or law).

2. Students do not apply directly to the university, instead they apply through a clearing system called UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), which handles the admission of every student who wishes to go to university in the UK.

3. The normal time for an A' level student to apply to UCAS is in the first term of the final year of their course. They can go to www.ucas.ac.uk and look at a list of every university and institution of higher education and search for the course they are interested in, and to see which university offers it. It is possible for them to look at the entry requirements for the course, this will include which A' level subjects are essential or preferable, and which grade is required in each subject. For example, if students want to go and study Veterinary Science, they must have at least 3 science subjects and probably all at grade A.

4. Students are allowed to apply for up to six different courses at different universities electronically through the UCAS website and pay a £15 registration fee. UCAS will then ask a teacher at their school for a written reference about them. In this reference the teacher must say what exam results they expect them to achieve at the end of their A' level course and also any other information that the teacher thinks is important or helpful. UCAS then sends the application to all of the universities they have chosen and each university decides whether they will invite the student for an interview.

5. When a university decides to request them to visit their facilities they send the student a list of items they will need to bring with them. This can be things like examples of their coursework, or if they are applying to study music, a composition or essay on a musical topic and their instrument to play piece of music of an appropriate standard. During the interview the head of the department will ask them about themselves and why they are interested in studying at that institution. They also have the opportunity to ask about life at the university and the facilities as well as to see the accommodation and refectory. "Open Days" and interviews usually last several hours and are extremely daunting, as it is the first chance for the student to see these imposing and menacing academic halls of learning!

6. Normally ten days after their visit to the university, UCAS writes to the student to tell them if the university is happy to offer them a place. These offers are either “conditional” or “unconditional”. A “conditional” offer means that the university is happy to accept them if they obtain certain grades in their A’ level exams. An “unconditional” offer means that the university is happy to accept the student because they think they are academically good enough to join the university and their A’ level grades will not be as important.

7. After they have visited all the universities the student is interested in if they can accept any “unconditional offers” immediately. However, if all of their offers are “conditional” or they have not decided whether they want to accept the “unconditional” offer yet, the student can wait until they have received their A’ level exam results and make their decision then.

8. When the student has received their A’ level results they can see if they have reached the requirements of their “conditional” offers. If they have the right grades then they can accept the university’s offer, which means they can start at that university in September. However, if their grades are not good enough or if they have flunked them altogether, they can contact the university they had the “conditional” offer from and see if they will accept them with lower grades. If the university will not accept them with these lower grades then they can visit the UCAS website and see which other universities are offering the same course or a similar course with lower grade requirements.

9. This is known as the clearance system. This information is also published in some British newspapers, such as The Guardian and The Times. The student can then apply to these universities and if the university is happy to accept them, then they can start in September. If no university or Higher Education institute will accept them, then they can pay to go to a Further Education institute for an extra year and retake their exams and reapply through UCAS the following year.

10. It is also possible to apply to go to university as a mature student. Mature students are people who are 21 years old or older. These people often do not have A’ levels but have useful experience through their work, life or other studies which qualifies them to attend university. It is sometimes necessary for them to do a one-year foundation course (which is a form of entrance exam) so that it is easier for them to start a university degree course if they have not attended school or college for a long time.

Financially supporting yourself through University

11. Because Higher Education in the UK is not free, it is necessary for the student to apply to their local education authority (that is the education authority in the area that they live in) for a Government loan to pay for their course fees before they start university. It is important to apply for this loan before March so that the money will be available to the student when they start at university in September.

12. This loan is to be repaid by the student at the end of their course in instalments but only when the student is earning a minimum of £15,000 per year. If they don’t earn £15,000 a year between the time they finish university and the age of retirement

(60 years for women and 65 years for men) then they never have to pay it back, however, the average salary for a recently qualified person with a university degree is £18,000 per year.

^{13.} The local education authority (LEA) will also look at the financial situation of each student (their parents' income etc) and can award a grant of up to £2,700 to students from poorer families. This payment does not have to be repaid at the end of the course. Some universities also award bursaries for students they think will be outstanding. The amount of money in the bursary is different in every university.

^{14.} In the United Kingdom it is expected that the parents will support their children financially while they are at university. However, if the student needs extra money, they can apply to the Student Loans Company for a loan from £3,415 to £6,170 per year. £6,170 per year is the maximum amount a student can receive for each year of their course, and this maximum amount is only available for students living in London, but not with their parents, during term time. This loan is also repayable by the student after they have completed their course and are earning more than £15,000 a year.

^{15.} It is also possible to arrange an overdraft with their bank for the period of their studies. In 2001, the average overdraft for a university student was £5,961, however, this rises every year by an average of £1,250. That means, in the year 2006, the average overdraft will be £12,211. This must also be repaid at the end of university. Therefore a student could be over £33,000 in debt at the end of their studies at university. This does not include any credit cards they might have!

After-reading questions

Scan the text and answer the following questions:

1. What is the entrance procedure for UK universities?
2. What do you do if your exam grades are worse than you expected?
3. What are the interview requirements for students wishing to study music?
4. Under which circumstances is it necessary to do an entrance exam?