

So you want to go to university: what next?

Deciding to go to university is likely to be one of the biggest time and financial commitments you will make. So choosing the right place to spend the next three, four, or even up to seven years of your life is absolutely essential.

We hope the questions below will help you clarify what's most important to you, and what you hope to gain from your university and student experience. They should also help you make the most of your time at the fair, by providing some starting points for conversations with the university representatives you meet.

What are you looking for?

Different places suit different people. Would you like to be close to home, move to a new part of the country, or even experience another country entirely? Do you like the idea of being in the centre of a busy city, or would you prefer a more peaceful location?

As well as differences in surroundings, you should also think about what you hope to get out of your course. Not every university or college offers the same courses, and even if the name of the course is the same, the actual content might be considerably different.

Thinking about going abroad?

If you are considering studying abroad, it's worth noting that most countries do not have a centralised application service like UCAS. You'll need to research possible universities in the country you would like to visit, and check their entry requirements and application deadlines individually.

If possible, it's a good idea to visit the university before you apply, or at least talk to current or past students, before you commit to spending three or more years there. Make sure you find out about support, accommodation, assessment, teaching methods, and visa requirements – as well as all the other things you would check in a UK university.

The fair – what to expect on the day

The fair is your opportunity to find out about lots of different universities and colleges all in one place. You'll be able to:

- Pick up leaflets and brochures, which you can take away to read and discuss with your family and other advisers
- Learn about a variety of different options, allowing you to an informed choice in your own time
- Talk to staff who run the courses you want to apply to, and ask them the questions that really matter to you.

Often current students also attend, as student ambassadors for their university. Look out for them if you'd like to speak to someone who's already gone through the application process, and to get the low-down on what starting university is really like.

A few useful things to take with you on the day...

- A copy of the seminar timetable, and a note of any seminars of particular interest to you
- Pen and notepad – you'll be surprised how much information you can find out and keeping track of who said what can get tricky!
- Five to ten key questions to ask university representatives, to help you to assess whether the university meets your expectations
- A strong bag (and comfortable shoes!) You'll be surprised how many prospectuses and information brochures you will pick up!

Preparation before the fair

The following list of questions, compiled by UCAS, is designed to get you thinking about what you want from your student experience. Considering your answers should help you clarify what you want from your university experience, and what to ask on the day to find out which courses and universities suit your wishes.

Near or far?

You may need to look for a local course so that you can stay with your family or you might be happy to move to wherever you need to go to do the right course. Or is it the draw of living in another country that appeals most?

Town or country?

Would you like to live in the centre of a big city to be close to all the facilities it has to offer, or do you prefer a rural location?

Transport

Where are the transport links? How much does it cost? Will there be a lot of travel between campuses? Parking spaces, bike racks?

Small or large?

Do you like the idea of studying in a really large university, where there are large lecture theatres and something for everybody, or would you prefer a small site where you can get to know everyone?

Campus or non-campus?

Are you bothered whether you're on a campus, where everything you need is located on one site, or do you like the idea of moving around between sites?

What is the quality of study facilities, books and learning resources like?

Very important if you're going to be spending a lot of time there.

Hall of residence or rented accommodation?

Does it have guaranteed institution-managed accommodation for first year students? Or for international students? What's the cost of staying in halls? How easy is it to find a student house to live in? Is there help for international students to find accommodation if you are moving their from abroad?

Is there a range of activities, clubs and societies?

Many universities boast a vast array of clubs and societies from rowing and tennis to debating and religious clubs, but some will be more active than others so check with the students' union and ask students when you visit on an open day.

Nightlife and social life?

Can you be assured of getting the social life you're after? Does it have an active students' union? What events does the students' union arrange? Are there clubs and pubs nearby that you want to go to?

Male to female ratio?

Are you interested in whether there are more females on campus than males or vice versa?

What sports facilities are there?

Many universities have gyms, playing fields and swimming pools on site, which are important if you like an active life. Some universities offer sports courses as an extra credit towards your degree – is this something that would be of interest to you? Other facilities to consider are library, lecture theatres and seminar rooms, computer labs, bars and clubs, launderettes and shops!

What is the university's reputation?

The reputation of a university or college can be very subjective, and it's important to choose a university that suits you rather than trying to fit into one that might not work for you. However, if you are thinking about your CV and the kudos a certain university will bring then perhaps reputation is important for you. Maybe certain courses at specific universities are better regarded by an area of business or industry than others.

A great resource for this is the QS World University Rankings, which you can use to find the best places to study by subject area and department. There's also a ranking of the world's best student cities. To check this out visit www.topuniversities.com

Does it have expert teaching staff?

What is the student to staff ratio? Are the academic staff experts in their field? How was the subject you were interested in rated in the latest Research Assessment Exercise (soon to be the Research Excellence Framework)? What teaching methods are used?

What's the general ambience of the university and the university town?

How does it feel when you visit? Do you feel safe and comfortable moving around the campus and town? Does it excite you? Does it have a view or a stunning piece of architecture that would inspire you? Does it have the space and support to be who you want it to be?

Making the most of your time at the fair

Once you've had a chance to consider these questions and what's important to you, the following questions will help you get the information you need from university representatives at the fair.

Getting onto the course

- How many places are available for the course and how many applications are received each year? How many are from international students?
- What is the usual application process for this institution/course?
- Are there any subjects or qualifications that are not acceptable for your course? How are qualifications from the UK (A-levels, AS-levels, IB etc) considered?
- What qualities do you look for when considering applicants?
- What key skills are looked for and what evidence of them is required?
- Will I have to sit an additional admissions test?

The course itself

- How is the course assessed - by exam or continuous assessment?
- Is it possible to study abroad for part of the course?
- How flexible is the course? Is there scope to pursue special interests?
- How easy is it to change course or to study a subsidiary course?
- How is the course taught - through lectures, tutorials, seminars, laboratory work, other?
- What is the staff to student ratio?
- Do departments give help or advice about obtaining sponsorship?
- Will I be expected to buy materials or equipment?
- Do they offer scholarships for international students? How are these awarded?

The university or college

- Is it based on one site?
- Do students 'live in'? Can all first years be accommodated?
- How far away is the accommodation from the institution?
- What is the typical cost of accommodation?
- What is the typical cost of living?
- Do I need to have personal transport? May I keep a car/motorbike/cycle? If so, can it be parked?
- Is public transport available from the halls of residence to lectures? If yes, what does it cost?

Student facilities

- Can you tell me about student services, the students' union, clubs, job shop, societies and sports/recreation facilities at your institution? What support services are provided (eg careers service, counselling, finance and medical)?
- What support facilities exist for students with additional needs?

The future

- Where are graduates from this course likely to find employment?
- What exemptions does this course give with respect to professional qualifications?
- What opportunities are there for students to stay on after graduation? Are there visa implications or restrictions?

Costs/financial

Costs to consider are tuition fees, course equipment, field trips, cost of living, funding, sponsorship, bursaries.

Finding out more

- If I have any specific questions in the future, who should I contact at your institution?
- What are the arrangements for attending an open day or making a personal visit?
- Is there an 'alternative' student prospectus? How do I get one?

We hope this have given you more than enough food for thought about selecting the right university and course for you. We recommend you think of 5-10 key questions to discuss with the university representatives at the fair and wish you every success in your university applications.