

The UCAS application process – how it works

Nearly everyone who applies to an undergraduate course in the UK applies through UCAS. There are a very few exceptions to this; for instance, you can apply directly for all undergraduate degrees at the New College of the Humanities in London and to some part-time courses at other universities.

UCAS registration

UCAS opens for registration in May and you do this online via [UCAS Apply 2021](#). Once you have registered you can fill in the form in stages, adding information and choices or making changes and corrections as you go. You can do this right up until the point you finally submit your application.

Submission deadlines

Applications can be submitted from mid-September (the exact date changes each year).

15 October

Applications to Oxford and Cambridge and for medicine, veterinary science and dentistry must be sent by 15 October at the latest. **Recommended internal deadline: 25 September 2020.**

15 January

All other applications (with the exception of some art courses with a March deadline) must be submitted by 15 January. **Abingdon recommends that applications are sent before 27 November 2020.**

Sections of the UCAS application form

Personal details

The first section of the form asks for all your personal details, like name, address, contact details, date of birth, residential status, passport details (if you are an overseas resident) and any special needs. You'll also be asked to create a password. It is essential that you make a note of this password and keep it somewhere safe, as only you will know what it is. When you register, a username and UCAS personal ID number will also be created. You will need to keep a note of these too.

The personal details section is also the place to declare any **additional support** that you usually have, such as extra time in exams or support for a particular learning difficulty. Declaring this does not have a negative impact on your application; the purpose is to inform the universities so that, should you accept an offer, they are aware of your needs and do all that they can to put in place the support that you need.

Under this section, you also need to tell UCAS your **student support fee code**. This is simply so that the universities know whether you are a UK student or an overseas student. Regardless of whether you are taking a student loan or not, all UK residents must put 02 and all overseas residents must put 01. It is important to get this right because the universities refer to it when determining what sort of offer to give you.

Nominated access

If you want, you can provide details of someone else you would be happy to talk to the universities on your behalf, make decisions on your behalf and have access to your application if necessary. Most people choose a parent, but it could also be a teacher or tutor. This can be useful if you are travelling at any point during the year of application or if you are taking a gap year and will be out of the UK.

Additional information

This section is where UCAS gathers information about applicants, so that they can understand the demographic of the applicants in any given year. So, it is really for their research purposes and does not affect your application at all. The sorts of questions in this section include your ethnic origin and religion. You can leave some of this section blank if you do not want to answer the questions.

Student finance

This section must be completed. It's just a case of ticking the box to say you understand about student finance.

Course choices

You can apply to up to 5 courses, unless you apply for medicine in which case you can apply to 4 medicine courses (plus one other, such as biomedical sciences, if you want to). You can apply for more than one course at the same university, although you need to think carefully about whether there is any benefit to this. (Also remember that you usually write one personal statement so it would have to cover all subjects you apply for.) If you can't decide on all five courses, you can send off your application with one choice or as many as you are certain about and add the others later in UCAS Track, provided you do so by the application deadline of 15 January.

It's important that you get the right university and course codes – you select these from a drop-down list, so you'll need to make sure that they match the details on the relevant university website. Regardless of the order in which you enter them, the courses get listed alphabetically so you don't need to state an order of preference. When each university looks at your application, they cannot see the other universities to which you have applied. If you are applying to Oxbridge, you have to choose between Cambridge or Oxford; you cannot apply to both.

Education section

In this section you should add all the schools that you have attended where you have taken public exams, like i/GCSEs and A Levels/Pre-Us. Under each school, you need to make sure that you enter **all** of the exams you have taken, the grades you achieved and the exam boards. These details must be accurate and correct, because any error could result in a change to or negation of any offers you receive - universities can ask to see your exam certificates, which state the exam board. You must also list any exams you are yet to take, putting the grade as pending. In this section, you can also enter any music or drama exams you have taken/are going to take as well as Duke of Edinburgh awards.

Employment section

This is where you enter details of any paid work you have done. This includes weekend, part time or holiday work. If you have not done any relevant work, or if it was unpaid, leave this section blank.

Personal statement

This is the only section of the form where you have the chance to tell the universities about the 'real' you, what you are like and why you want to study the course you have applied for. Some people will tell you that universities don't read personal statements, but this is not true. They do and they refer to them particularly in borderline decision cases.

Writing about yourself can be challenging and, with a limit of 4000 characters (just over a side of A4), the personal statement can be difficult to write. Abingdon recommends that you start drafting your statement over the summer so that when you get back to school at the beginning of the autumn term you are in a good position to finalise it. Don't worry if it takes you a long time to write it – some people get it done in one or two drafts, while others can take up to a dozen or more drafts to get it right.

There is not much point in starting your personal statement until you have decided which course you want to apply for. The key thing the admissions officers are asking is 'have you chosen the right subject for the right reason?'. So your statement must convince them of this and you will need to include details of why you want to study the subject, what you have done to date to prepare for further study (extra reading/courses/research etc) and what you might be thinking of doing in the future. You'll also need to include some details about your interests and things you do outside the classroom, whether that is at school or at home and try and link how the skills you have gained from these activities might help you at university.

On the understanding that some universities offer courses which are not that common, or which they have designed especially, in a very few cases universities will accept an alternative or 'substitute' statement. Durham, for example, allows you to send one once they have received your UCAS application. However, don't rely on this; it is better to apply for similar courses at each of the universities to which you apply.

Payment

Once you have completed all of the sections outlined above, you will need to pay before you can submit your application. There is the option to pay by credit or debit card (which is really for OAs). Double check with your school about this process.

Reference

The reference is written by your tutor and serves two purposes. The first is to complement and confirm the details of what you have written in your personal statement. The second is to outline your academic achievements so far and your potential and motivation for your chosen course. This helps the admissions tutors to assess your academic suitability, likely A Level/Pre-U exam grades and possible career aspirations. As soon as you know which course you are applying for and where, you should tell your tutor so that (s)he can start writing

your reference. Don't leave this to the last minute as (s)he will have quite a few to write, so you cannot expect it to be completed at short notice. It is extremely helpful for your tutor to see a draft of your personal statement, so that they can avoid repetition and write a reference that complements and supports your personal statement. Your tutor will show you your reference, although you will not be allowed to keep a copy of it. When ready, the reference is added by the school's UCAS office.

Predicted grades

The predicted grades are added by the school's UCAS office (this may be different at different schools) and appear at the bottom of your reference. These grades are based on your academic performance throughout the lower sixth.

What happens after you submit your application

This process may differ between schools but generally, once you have submitted your part of the UCAS application, the school's UCAS office adds the reference and your predicted grades and then checks that everything is correct. If you have made an error, they will send it back to you to correct. This could be anything from a typo in your personal statement, to an incorrect exam grade to missing details. Last year approximately 75% of applications were sent back for revisions, which just makes for delays. Try to ensure that yours is completely accurate before you submit it.

Almost immediately after your application is sent off by the school UCAS Office, you will receive an email from UCAS confirming that they have received it. Shortly after that you should also hear from the universities to which you have applied, saying that they have received your application.

At this stage, you can no longer log in to UCAS Apply; instead you can follow the progress of your application by logging in to [UCAS Track](#). When Track is open you can sign in [here](#). UCAS Track is where you will receive replies from the universities and where you make your decisions about which offers you will accept.

You can expect to hear back from universities at any time from the day after they receive your application to the end of May, and in some cases as late as June. Some universities are quick to reply, while others deliberately wait until they have received all applications and will not reply until well after 15 January. If you do not hear for some weeks, it is not bad news. It simply means that your application is still being reviewed. Some subject departments may send out replies earlier than others at the same university; some of your friends who have applied for the same subject may hear before you. Again, don't worry; it's often due to how many applications they receive in a given week and where your application sits in their system.

Once you have heard back from all of your university choices, and you have received offers, you can make your **firm (first) and insurance (second) choice**. The date by which you do this depends on when all of the universities have replied to you. You will be shown your

personal deadline in UCAS Track. The dates change slightly every year, but in general terms are:

- If you receive your last decision on or before **31 March**, your reply date is **1 May** (if your postal address is in the UK/EU).
- If you receive your last decision on or before **early May**, your reply date is **early June** (includes applicants with a postal address outside the EU, but not applicants using Extra to find a place).
- If you receive your last decision on or before **early June**, your reply date is **late June** (except if you're using UCAS Extra to find a place).

Provided you meet these deadlines you can make your firm and insurance choices at any time once you are certain of them, but there is no need to rush. In fact, it is sensible to take time to consider your options. Once you have made your choices you CANNOT change them. Please note that you also cannot swap over your firm and insurance choices.

Here are some tips which might help you decide:

1. Your firm choice must be the course that makes you go "Yes, this is what I really want to study and this is where I want to study it!"
2. Your firm choice doesn't necessarily have to be the one with the highest grade offer. If your first choice has a lower offer than your other choices, then that's a bonus!
3. If you are not certain about which university you would like to go to, try and visit them again before you make your decision. Also, take a close look at the courses - and compare them in terms of modules/topics/how much freedom of choice you get/how you are taught/examined and so on. It is the course rather than the university which is important. It is easier to put up with where you are studying than what and how you are studying.
4. It is recommended that you choose an insurance choice with lower entry criteria than your firm choice, because that gives you a chance of getting in if you don't make the grades for your firm choice. If, however, your preferred first choice has the same or lower grades than your insurance choice, it is best to speak to the UCAS office about the best course of action to understand the possible repercussions and outcomes.
5. Your insurance choice must be somewhere you want to go - there is little point in selecting somewhere that doesn't appeal, because if you don't get into your firm choice, this is where you'll be studying for the next 3/4+ years.
6. Your insurance choice cannot necessarily guarantee you accommodation, so you may have to be prepared to sort that for yourself.
7. If the wording of the offer you receive from a university says so, you can make an unconditional offer your insurance choice. In this case, if you don't get into your firm (conditional) choice, it means that you'll definitely have a place at your insurance (unconditional) uni.

If you do not receive any offers, you can sometimes add another choice through [UCAS Extra](#). This is a service provided by UCAS allowing you to add one choice at a time and is open from 25 February to 5 July 2020.

If you included five choices on your application, have received decisions from all five, and weren't accepted, or if you declined the offers you received, you will be able to use Extra to add another choice. Once you have researched the course, you simply add it in UCAS Track.

If you did not use all your choices in your initial application, you can just add another choice in UCAS Track as long as it is before 30 June, and you have not accepted or declined any offers.

If you don't hold any offers after 5 July, you will be able to add an additional choice using UCAS Clearing, which opens on 6 July 2020. You can add just one choice at a time in Clearing.

Results day – the options

On results day, the third Thursday in August, there are 7 potential things that could happen:

1. Accepting
2. Adjustment
3. Deferring
4. Withdrawing
5. Clearing
6. Re-marking
7. Re-taking

1. Accepting

If you get the results you need for your firm choice, you will automatically be accepted on to that place. If you don't get the grades for your firm choice, but the grades for your insurance choice are lower and you meet them, then you will automatically get accepted on to that course. The relevant university should contact you on results day. It is possible that, even if you do not quite get the required grades, you will be accepted and given a place at either your firm or insurance choice.

2. Adjustment

If, on results day, you have done better than expected, you might want to see if you can get into a course at a different university, in effect 'upgrading' your course and university. From the moment your place is confirmed by your firm choice university on results day, you have 5 days in which to try and secure an offer from a different university. During this time, your firm choice will hold your place for you.

When you get your results, a button saying *Apply for adjustment* will appear on your UCAS Track page. If you register for Adjustment, any universities you decide to contact will be able to see your application. To find out which universities are offering courses through adjustment, you will need to visit each university's website; there is no central list. You will need to call the universities which interest you, explaining that you are interested in finding a place through adjustment and you might be interviewed over the phone. If the university has a place for you, they will email you or phone you. Confirmation of this should come through on UCAS Track, enabling you to accept the offer. Once you accept, your place at your firm choice will be released for someone else.

3. *Deferring*

If, between applying for university and receiving your results, you decide that you want to take a gap year, you should contact the university where you have a place and explain that you would like to defer. Many universities will be happy to do this, especially if you have a good reason, like work experience, work abroad or you want to experience more independence and gain confidence before you go to university.

4. *Withdrawing*

If for any reason you get a place but decide that you do not want to take it, you can withdraw. Do not do this before you have carefully thought about why you are doing this and that you understand the consequences. You can withdraw by contacting the university and asking them to 'release' you from your place. If you withdraw from both your firm and insurance choices you will be able to look for a place through clearing (where there is no guarantee of a place) or apply again next year if you want to.

5. *Clearing*

If you don't get the grades you need but still want to go to university, you can apply for a place through clearing. It is possible that the universities you applied to might consider your application again (especially if you only just missed the grades), so it is worth calling them first before you look at other places available through clearing. Last year over 45,000 students found a place at university through clearing.

UCAS releases details of places available through clearing regularly before results day, with the most up to date published just after midnight on results day itself. If you are worried about your results, you might want to see what options are available when this list is published. It can be quite competitive, so it is a good idea to research before results day what is available and draw up a list of the courses that interest you, with the contact numbers you will need.

It is then a case of calling the universities to see whether they will consider your application. You'll need to give them your ten-digit UCAS ID number and the clearing number that UCAS will have sent you. UCAS doesn't accept clearing entries until 5pm on results day so you have time to negotiate a place. If you find a course that you like and which will accept you, enter it through Clearing. You will then be notified if you have been accepted. If not, you will be able to add another choice – you can only enter one clearing choice at a time.

6. *Re-marking*

If you miss out on a place at university because your mark is just below the grade boundary, it is possible to request a priority re-mark. You would need to contact both Mrs Cottam in the school's exams office and the relevant university so that they know you are hoping to get your exam re-marked. This needs to be done by 31 August and the university should hold your place for you until you hear the result of the re-mark. Two things to be aware of: firstly, there is a cost and secondly, your mark could go down as well as up. You might want to talk to your subject teacher before applying for a re-mark.

7. Re-taking

If you don't get into the university that you really want to go to, you could consider re-taking one or two A Levels, or modules, to improve your grades and re-apply next year. This does involve a significant amount of hard work and you need to feel sure that you can commit to that and that you fundamentally believe that you can improve your grade.

Applying for student finance

If you are a UK student and wish to apply for student finance, you can do so by applying at <https://www.gov.uk/apply-for-student-finance>. You can apply at any time; you do not need to have a confirmed place. You can even apply up to nine months after you start your course.

A note on alternative and unconditional offers

There is a growing trend amongst universities to give out alternative, attainment or unconditional offers. These are usually on the proviso that you put that university as your firm choice (although a very few universities may honour such offers for insurance choices too). In some cases the alternative offer may be one grade lower, e.g. AAB instead of AAA, or it may be for equivalent grades (totalling the same UCAS points), e.g. AAA or A*AB or A*A*C. Attainment offers can be a lot lower.

Alternative offers can also be given to applicants with the **EPQ (Extended Project Qualification)**. For example, an offer of AAA may be changed to 'AAB with an A in the EPQ'. The EPQ is favoured by many universities because its style of learning, time management and independent working prepares students for the way they work at university.

Unconditional offers, in particular, can be very attractive, but you need to be certain that you really want to go to that university.