

'Choosing courses' session audio transcript

Video introduction

Hello everyone. I hope you are all keeping safe and healthy in these challenging and unusual times.

My name is Pete Marlow, and I work at UWE Bristol as a careers adviser in the pre-HE careers team. We work with local schools and colleges in the area to support students, like yourself, to explore all your options and plan for your next steps after you finish your current course.

Under normal circumstances, we would usually come into schools and colleges to speak to you personally, face-to-face. However due to the current lockdown we've decided to pre-record some of the workshops we would typically be delivering around this time of year so that you can still get the information and advice to help you plan ahead at the time you need it.

Although the session will be less interactive than if I was meeting you in person, there are still some activities for you to try to help reinforce the learning. You just need to pause the recording, do the activity, then restart the recording afterwards. There is a downloadable handout which accompanies this session which also includes some of the activities, so it's a good idea to print off a copy of this to use if you can.

At the end of the session, I'll give you our UWE Bristol pre-HE team email address so you can contact us if you have any questions. We're always happy to help where we can.

Finally, we are posting lots of sessions and resources on planning for your future and applying to university on the UWE Bristol Schools and Colleges webpages. So make sure you check these out too. I hope you find them useful.

Slide 1 – Choosing courses in Higher Education (HE)

So now onto this session, which focuses on choosing your HE course. The aim of this talk is to help you feel more confident in choosing what you would like to study at university and where.

I've turned the video off now and moved onto audio recording only so you can focus on the slides.

Slide 2 – In this session

In this session, which will last around 30 minutes, I will talk you through the different types and levels of HE courses before helping you to think about what you'll need to consider when choosing your course and university. To help you, I'll break things down into 6 simple steps that you can follow.

Slide 3 – Higher Education in numbers

Firstly though to put things into context, there are 3 numbers we often refer to when talking about Higher Education which are written on this slide. Have you heard these before? To explain: 50,000 is the number of courses, or variations on courses, available to choose from. 395 is the number of HE institutions you could potentially study at, which includes both universities and colleges offering degree level courses. 5 is the maximum number of choices you can make on your UCAS application, which you will complete when you apply to HE.

Let's face it, narrowing your choices down from 50,000 to 5 can seem a little daunting. However, we're here to guide you through this in this workshop, so you can do it yourself.

Slide 4 – Doing your research

You're probably starting to realise just how important it is to do your research. It will help you to figure out exactly what you're looking for and to find the right options for you.

In fact, one of the main reasons why a small number of students drop out of university each year is because their course and / or university wasn't quite as expected. In other words, there was a mismatch between their expectations and the reality. So it's really worth doing your research so you know what to expect. It will take a little time and effort, of course, but it's totally worth it and will definitely increase your chances of getting the right university experience for you.

Now onto the 6 steps...

Slide 5 – Step 1: Consider your subject area

Firstly, you'll need to decide on the subject area you want to study. As you can see from this slide, there's a huge amount of options available. Whatever your area of interest, it's highly likely there will be a course available in this area. Also, many degrees don't ask for specific A Levels or BTECs so your choice of degree subject is wider than you might think.

My suggestion is to start off by considering what has captured your interest in your studies so far. If there are specific parts of your A Levels or BTECs that you've loved studying and felt really engaged by - for example a Marketing unit in Business Studies; a Film Production module in Media; learning about Cyber Security in IT – then chances are you can study a course relevant to that specific area if you want to. Of course, if you don't want to focus in on a more niche area, you can study a more general subject area.

With your initial UCAS search, I recommend that you start out really broad. This might seem counterintuitive given that you are trying to narrow things down, but it is helpful to find out all about the different options available for your subject area at first. This way you can be sure you've at least considered and explored everything, before discarding those that don't appeal. This will help you to feel confident in your decisions, knowing that you've explored all your options.

Slide 6 – Which one is false?

Just to make the point about the wide range of courses available, here is a little activity to try. On the slide are 16 courses, 15 of which you can actually study (believe it or not!). If you would like to pause the recording here and try to identify which one is the fake course, you can do that now.

So the fake course is taxidermy, which you can't currently study at university. However all the rest are genuine courses, which really gives you a sense of some of the more obscure options on offer.

Slide 7 – Types of degree subject

It's useful at this point to briefly explain about the different types of degree subject. This can be viewed as a spectrum. At one end, you have non-vocational subjects, like maths, geography, English and so forth, which are broad areas and link to lots of different possible career paths. At the other end of the spectrum are vocational courses, which typically help to prepare you for a specific occupation. For example if you study physiotherapy, this is likely to lead to becoming a physio. Somewhere in the middle are semi-vocational courses, which have larger range of occupations they link to.

Remember that *all* courses will develop the skills which employers are looking for. In fact, lots of graduate employers don't actually mind which subject you studied, more that you've proved you can succeed at this level of study. Therefore, there isn't one type of course that's 'best' – it's the one which suits *you* best.

Slide 8 – Which subject should you choose?

This is the big question – what subject should I choose? To start off, think about what you are studying already at Level 3. Are there any subjects that stand out that you really love, feel totally engaged and

motivated by? If so, these sound definitely worth exploring for HE level study as it's very likely that this interest will grow as you study your subject in more depth. Remember that you really do need to have a genuine interest in your subject, as you'll need to be committed for three years or more.

It is totally fine if you don't want to continue with any of your current subjects as you can take on a new subject at university. If you do this, your research is even more important to make sure you're really clear on what the subject involves, what you might be studying and where it could take you. You can find all of this information on online course information guides, university websites and open days, which I'll talk more about later in this session.

Some of you might already have quite clear ideas of the careers you might like to go into when you graduate. If so, it is important to check the entry requirements for this career, for example in terms of what degree you may need to access it, to be sure you're on the right track. The Prospects website I'll highlight to you later is really useful for this research.

Another great resource if you know you want to study for a degree but aren't quite sure which subject is the SACU website shown on the slide. This asks you a series of questions about your interests, skills and strengths, and then suggests some possible degree ideas to explore on the basis of your responses. This could at least help you get you started with some initial ideas.

Slide 9 – What are you curious about?

We've already mentioned that you really do need to be engaged by the subject you choose and curious to learn more about it. This curiosity is vital not only for your commitment to the course, but also because you will need to demonstrate it in your UCAS application and in particular, in your personal statement. Briefly, the personal statement is a short reflective essay you write which aims to convince admissions tutors that you deserve a place on the course you are applying to. So it's really important to show your passion and curiosity for your subject to help secure you a university place.

Just to note, we have recorded a separate session on personal statements that is specifically designed to help you with this so be sure to take a look at that on our website as well.

Slide 10 – Which course is the most competitive? (1)

One factor which might shape what you choose is how competitive a particular course is. The activity on this slide is designed to challenge your perceptions and encourage you to consider where you get your information from. To do the activity, pause the recording and take a couple of moments to try and identify which of these courses at the ten universities listed on the slide is the most competitive. By this I mean, which courses have the lowest percentage of those applying being offered a place. When you are ready, restart the recording.

Slide 11 – Which course is the most competitive? (2)

So, here are the results. You can see that the most competitive courses of those listed are Midwifery at Liverpool St John Moores and Child Nursing at York. These statistics are from the Which University website from 2019 entry.

What you can see from this slide is that often it is actually the *course* rather than the *university* that is competitive. There are a number of leading Russell Group universities on the list, such as Durham, Bristol and Cardiff, which actually offer courses where a relatively high percentage of applicants get a place. So don't be put off applying to a university that you are interested in based on your perceptions of its standing or prestige. The exception to this is Oxford and Cambridge, both of which are exceptionally competitive to get into with far more applicants than places available.

Briefly, the reason that nursing and other healthcare related degree courses can be very competitive is that often students need to spend a significant amount of time on work placement as part of the course yet the number of these opportunities within the NHS is limited. Of course, this competition doesn't mean you shouldn't apply, but that you will have to put together a really strong application, ideally including relevant work experience to prove your commitment.

Slide 12 – Step 2: Consider the level of course

The second step is to consider the course level. On the slide there's a diagram which explains the HE educational ladder and the different levels you might study at. Before we look at these more closely, I wanted to talk about a misconception among some students that going to university is only possible if you get excellent grades in your A levels or BTECs. This isn't true - you can access HE with a range of different grades. Some institutions will ask for higher grades, others lower. Also, there are now different options available which open doors to wider range of prospective students.

Most new students will start at undergraduate degree level, the middle row on the diagram, which typically lasts 3-4 years. The level below this is foundation degrees, which are equivalent to first two years of degree and usually offered in more vocational subject areas. After this you can top-up and do third year at university to get a full degree. It is important to note is that the entry requirements for a foundation degrees are lower than a normal degree and the fees can be cheaper too.

Another option is to do a degree with a foundation year, which is often known as 'Year 0', and we have many of these on offer at UWE Bristol. The Year 0 takes places as an extra year at the start of your degree to get you up to speed. These courses have lower entry requirements and are perfect if you haven't studied the required subjects to get onto a particular degree (for example you haven't done maths but want to do an engineering degree) as these aren't stipulated. Year 0 gives you the time to build up the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to access the first year of the degree course afterwards.

It is also worth pointing out that after an undergraduate, or first, degree, there are opportunities to do further study at postgraduate level, such as Masters or PhD, the top two rows on the slide. In fact some careers, such as working in academia, will require this level of study to be completed. So your educational journey may actually need to continue beyond your first degree.

Slide 13 – Step 3: Choose the type of course

Step 3 is to choose the type of course to study. The slide shows four possibilities. You're probably aware you can study a single subject for your whole degree, as you can see in the first row, but you might be less aware of the other options. A joint honours degree is where you study two subjects alongside each other, spending an equal amount of time, 50%, on each. This might be perfect if there are two subjects you love and you simply can't choose between them. Also while there are lots of subject combinations you can do as a joint honours, not every conceivable pair of subjects is offered together. On course search tools, joint honours courses are written in the format Subject A AND Subject B.

There are a smaller number of degrees which use the major/minor split more commonly found in the USA. This is where you study your 'major' subject for 75% of your time, and your 'minor' for the remaining 25%. These courses are typically written in the format Subject A WITH Subject B, A being the major. It is definitely worth pointing out that it is not necessary to focus on a single subject in order to get a good graduate job, so both of the options just described are valid and respected pathways.

Another option to consider is a sandwich degree. This lasts an extra year compared to a regular degree because you spend a year on work placement, either in the UK or overseas, typically in your third year.

This can be a brilliant opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills you've gained during your degree in the workplace whilst getting paid. Having a year of experience can really increase your employability, as employers really value experience gained on placement.

Slide 14 – Step 4: Check your course entry requirements

Step 4 is to carefully check the entry requirements for any courses you're considering. It can be confusing as different universities may specify their entry requirements in one of two ways, but don't worry as these are basically two different ways of saying the same thing.

I'll explain using the two course examples on slide, Law at UWE Bristol and Adult Nursing at Southampton. For the nursing course, you'll see that this course asks for specific grades, in this case B, B, B at A Level including a Science or Social Science, or a BTEC at triple Distinction. This shows how some unis and courses will sometimes include specific subjects that they require you to study, although this is not always the case.

The law course requires 112 UCAS points. To explain, you are awarded a specific number of UCAS points for each grade you achieve in your subjects. So for A Levels, an A* equates to 56 points, an A is 48 points, a B is worth 40 and so on. So, in the UWE Bristol example this course would require grades B, B, C (or 40 + 40 + 32). In effect, UCAS points are just another way of expressing grade requirements. You can find out more about the UCAS tariff and the points you get for each grade on the UCAS website.

It's useful to note that sometimes completing other qualifications, such as the Extended Project Qualification, or EPQ, to a high standard may result in a lower entry requirement. All this information should be included on the university's course pages under 'entry requirements' so please check carefully.

As mentioned earlier, you can make up to 5 UCAS choices so it is wise to pick courses with a range of entry requirements. Some of these may be more stretching and challenging in terms of your ability to achieve the required grades, and others will have lower requirements which can act as an insurance in case you don't get the grades you hoped for. By using this strategy, you are hopefully covering every eventuality you may encounter on results day in August.

Slide 15 – Universities choose you...

So universities choose which students to offer places to, based on their academic achievements, personal statement and in some cases, on the basis of interviews, auditions or a portfolio of work. The last two, auditions and portfolios, are more commonly requirements of creative courses.

However, it's really important to remember that *you* have a choice too. You get to select the universities you want to apply for. They have to work to also meet your needs. So, it's really important to take some time to reflect on what you're looking for, what you want from your course and university experience and what will suit you best. The things that matter to each of us is different, so it's important to choose what is right for you. Over the next few slides, I'll run through the main factors you'll need to consider when making a decision.

Slide 16 – Step 5: Factors to consider when choosing a specific course

So by now you've reached the stage where you know what subject you'd like to do. Step 5 is all about narrowing it down to the exact course to study. There are a number of factors to bear in mind here.

We've discussed entry requirements already. Just to remind you, this is something you will need to check carefully before making a decision.

Another key factor here is course content. It is so important to research this so you really know what you will be studying on your course and to check it matches your interests. Remember that not all degrees will include exactly the same content even though they have the same course title. While core modules are likely to be similar across all courses, there could well be significant variations in terms of optional modules. Similarly courses with the same title could vary at different universities in terms of other factors, such as the assessment style and placement opportunities available. So make sure you really do your research to avoid any unwanted surprises.

By now in your educational journey, you're probably aware of how you perform best in terms of being assessed: whether you prefer exams, coursework or practical assessment for example. Courses vary in terms of assessment and this might shape your choice of course. Again, a breakdown of how you will be assessed in each year of your degree is provided on the uni course information pages.

Another factor to consider is contact time. This refers to the number of hours each week you spend being taught your subject. This can be through a variety of formats such as lectures, seminars or tutorials. Bearing in mind the significant investment you are making in a degree both in terms of your money and time, you want to get a decent amount of contact time and therefore value. You can find this information on The Uni Guide website and via universities' own webpages and open days.

Another two factors to consider are the placement opportunities and employer links on your course. Employer related contact is an important part of many courses but this can vary by university and geographical location. For example, Bristol is one of the UK's leading hubs of aerospace engineering companies, which means if you study a degree in this subject at UWE Bristol, there are excellent placement opportunities because of the really strong links with these companies. However if you studied the same course somewhere else without similar relevant locally based employers, these opportunities might be fewer.

Another two useful factors to think about are graduate destinations and student satisfaction. Destinations refers to information on what previous graduates completing a course have gone on to do next, so for example whether they are in employment, further study or are unemployed. In terms of satisfaction, all graduates are asked on completing their degree for feedback on all aspects of their university experience, including the teaching, student support, assessment and facilities, and more. All of this information is really useful for shaping *your own* decisions about whether to follow in their footsteps and do the same course. It can be found on the universities' own webpages and via a site called Discover Uni, which I'll talk more about later.

Lastly, it is helpful to consider career requirements and professional accreditation. In other words, will the degree allow you to get into a particular career you have in mind, and will it provide accreditation for you to access a professional body associated with that subject? For example, in the case of psychology, is your degree accredited by the British Psychological Society?

Slide 17 – Step 6: Factors to consider when choosing a uni

The final step in this process, step 6, is to consider the following factors about choosing which university to study at.

A key element for many students is the location of the university. Some of you will be keen to spread your wings and move far away to study, others to stay in your local area. On the next slide we will do a little activity to encourage you to fully explore what is out there before making a decision. Linked to location is whether the university is based in the city centre, where the uni buildings are spread around the city, or on a campus, where the buildings are all located on one site, oftentimes outside of the city centre. Both

of these factors come down to individual preference, but taking the opportunity to visit universities on open days are key in making a decision. More on this later.

In terms of finances, some parts of the country are more expensive to live in and this may influence your choices. London is the most costly by far, although you can typically borrow a greater maintenance loan to help offset this additional living cost. It's definitely worth pointing out here that there are a range of scholarships and bursaries available. These are sums of money that are given out to students that they don't have to pay back, unlike any student loans you take out. Scholarships are typically awarded for students who are excelling in some regard, for example, academically, musically or in sport. Bursaries are to support those students from more financially disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to still access university. To find out more about what is available, I recommend a website called the Scholarship Hub which describes the scholarships and bursaries each university offers.

The remaining factors on this page cover a range of different aspects of opportunities, facilities and support that a university may be able to offer. For example if there are specific activities you do currently that you would like to continue, or possibly new activities you'd like to get involved with, you can look into what is available at any university you are considering. Similarly if there are specific types of support you would like to access at university, you can find out if and how this is offered at any unis of interest.

As you can see the previous two slides, there really is a lot to be thinking about, and therefore you will need to take time to reflect on what is important to you and how much this matters in terms of your final decision. More on this shortly.

Slide 18 – How long would it take to get to these university cities from Bristol by train?

Here is an example of an activity we do with students in school and colleges. It is designed to challenge your ideas of where places actually are and therefore whether you might consider studying there. The task is to estimate how long it would take you to get to each of the 8 university cities on the slide, travelling by train from Bristol at 10am. I appreciate not all of you live in Bristol currently though so this might be challenging in that case. If you'd like to try, please pause the recording now.

So here are the answers. Manchester is 3 hours away by train, Exeter 1 hour 15. Cambridge takes 3 hours 30 despite not being that far way in terms of mileage. Warwick is 2 hours 20, Swansea 1 hour 45. It takes 6 and a half hours to get to Edinburgh. London is just 90 minutes away on a fast train and Portsmouth takes just under 3 hours to reach.

Slide 19 – UK Map

The aim of this activity is not to test your knowledge of the train timetables but to highlight where places actually are and show that they might be easier to reach than we think. So, check locations on a map and don't count out any unis and cities until you've found out more. In my experience, many students living in the South West are keen to stay very local to this area for HE study. This might limit your options and mean that you are missing out on places and courses which actually might suit you really well. It's definitely worth at least exploring what is out there before coming to your final decision.

Slide 20 – So which factors are more important to you?

Now it's time for you to do some thinking. I'd like all of you to try the following activity. You'll need to pause the recording and use the downloadable worksheet that you can access from the same webpage as this recording. Using the information from steps 5 and 6 of this process, try to identify which are the top 5 factors most important to you. You may need to go back in the recording to refresh your memory. Please write these important factors in the 'pyramid of choice' diagram on page 1 of the handout, adding in any additional notes to support your thinking. Pause the recording and try that now.

Slide 21 – Create your own league table

Hopefully you should now be starting to work out what matters most to you in terms of choosing a course and university. These factors can now start to form the framework for your research. I recommend that you do this detailed research by creating your own personal league table. I think the easiest way to do this as an Excel spreadsheet which you can update and change, using the table of page 2 of the handout as a guide.

The idea here is that along the top of your table in row 1, you add in the heading of course and university and then the key factors which you've identified previously as being most important to you. It could be more than the 5 you've thought about already if you like, this depends on your individual perspectives. In the example on the slide, this person's key factors are related to assessment type, course content, entry requirements, location and so forth.

You can then start do your research into the details of each course and uni and as you find out the relevant information, you can populate this in your table. As you go through available courses in your subject area, you will start to see which meet your personal requirements and which ones don't, and can therefore be crossed off your list. Going through this process should hopefully ensure that your research is systematic and thorough, and that you don't accidentally miss out on places which could suit you really well.

In my opinion, it is definitely worth taking the time and effort to research in this way. At the end of the process, you should be much nearer to your final choices.

Slide 22 – Finding all the information you need

There are a number of really useful websites shown on this slide that will help you explore and compare different courses in order to do your research fully. These are all listed on page 3 of your handout as well.

I encourage you to try and use a range of resources. Firstly, you can use either the UCAS website or the Uni Guide website to find comprehensive course listings and related info about each course. You can then delve deeper into the details of any specific courses of interest on the university's own course info page, which should give detailed information about what you would be studying.

It is also worth pointing out that the Discover Uni website has useful information about student satisfaction and graduate destinations. The Uni Guide contains helpful subject guides that are worth exploring and Prospects is helpful for giving information on potential jobs relating to studying a certain degree subject, which can reassure you that your course will lead to the career want. All of these resources will be helpful for completing your league table I just mentioned.

Slide 23 – University open days

A key part of the decision making process is attending open days, which will really give you a feel for a university and location and a sense of whether you would like to live and study there for 3+ years. In normal times, students would visit a university in person on an open day however at present, due to the current pandemic, many universities are transforming their open days from physical into virtual events. While virtual open days won't give the exact same experience, they are still a valuable opportunity to speak to staff and students, ask questions and find out more to shape your thinking. You may have the opportunity to attend 'live' sessions and webinars, and get advice on making a successful application and writing an effective personal statement.

On the slide are some suggested questions you could ask, and there are also useful subject-specific open day checklists on the Uni Guide website.

The website opendays.com has full listings of when all the open days are taking place. These are typically held either side of the summer holidays. So just to recap, these are definitely worth attending at those universities you have shortlisted through your research, as even virtual events can offer lots of useful insight to help you select your final 5 choices.

Slide 24 – Black Bullion – money advice site

In this penultimate slide I wanted to let you know about a really helpful online resource called Black Bullion. This is a free to access site which is designed to help you prepare your university finances. It includes a series of helpful online tools and guides covering aspects such as the financial costs and benefits of uni, student loan repayments and a budgeting calculator. Definitely worth a look.

Slide 25 – Good luck!

So we've reached the end of the session. If you have any questions about the topics I've covered or indeed any other aspects of exploring and applying to university, please do email our team at the address on the slide – prehecareersadviser@uwe.ac.uk We will try our best to answer them. It's really important to point out though that you must email us from your school or college email account, rather than a personal account, otherwise we won't be able to reply due to data protection. We look forward to hearing from you.

Lastly, we would really appreciate if it you could give us some feedback on this session by completing a very short, anonymous online survey which will appear in the next slide. This will help us to improve our service.

Thanks very much for listening to the session. I hope you've found it helpful and I wish you all the best with exploring and applying to university in the future.