

Choosing courses in Higher Education

Audio transcript

Slide 1: Introduction – Choosing courses in HE

Hello everyone. My name is Pete Marlow, and I work at UWE Bristol in the Widening Access team. We work with local schools and colleges in the area to support students, like yourself, with exploring your options and planning for your next steps after you finish your current courses.

This session is all about choosing courses in HE. This talk should hopefully help you to feel more confident about making your choices of what and where you might like to study in terms higher education.

Slide 2: In this session

In this session I will outline the different types and levels of HE courses before helping you to think about the range of different factors you will need to consider when choosing a course and university to study it at. To help you with this process, I'll break things down into 6 steps that you can follow.

Slide 3: Higher Education in numbers

Firstly though to set the context for the decision you will be making, there are 3 numbers often referred to when talking about Higher Education which are written on this slide. To explain: 35,000 refers to the number of courses, or variations on courses, available to choose from. 395 is the number of HE institutions that you could potentially study at, which includes both universities and colleges which offer degree level courses. 5 refers to the maximum number of choices you can make on your UCAS application, which you will complete when you apply to HE.

As you might be coming to realise though, research is absolutely key to this process. Research will enable you to figure out exactly what you're looking for and help you to identify the options that are best for you. It will significantly increase the likelihood of having a positive and successful university experience.

Now onto the 6 steps...

Slide 4: Step 1 – Consider the subject area

Firstly, you will need to decide upon the subject area you want to study. As you can see from this slide, there's a huge amount of choice available. Regardless of your specific interest, it is highly likely that there will be a course available in this area. It is worth pointing out that many degrees don't necessarily ask for specific A Levels or BTECs so your choice of degree subject is wider than you might perhaps think.

With your initial UCAS search, I recommend that you start out really broad. Whilst this might seem counterintuitive given that you are trying to narrow things down, it is helpful to increase your awareness of all the different options relating to a subject area of interest at first. This will help ensure that you have at least considered and explored everything, before discarding those that don't appeal. You can therefore have confidence in your decisions, knowing that you've made these in a fully informed way.

Slide 5: What subject should you choose?

This is the big question – what subject should I choose? As an initial starting point, 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 plausible that this interest will continue as you study the subject in more depth.

Alternatively, are there specific parts of your A Levels or BTECs that you've loved studying - for example a Marketing unit in Business Studies; a Film Production module in Media; learning about Cyber Security in IT. Chances are you can study a course relevant to that specific area if you want to.

It is totally fine if you don't wish to continue any of your current subjects as you can take on a new subject at university. If you do so, your research becomes even more critical so ensure that you are clear on what the subject involves, what you might be studying and where it could potentially lead afterwards.

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 potentially need to access it, to ensure you are taking the right path.

Another helpful resource to suggest if you know you want to study in HE but are unsure of what subject to do 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 give you some initial ideas and hopefully some momentum with your decision-making process.

Slide 6: Step 2 – Consider the level of course

The second step is to consider the level of your course. On the slide is a diagram which explains the HE educational ladder and the different levels you might study at.

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'. These are widely offered at UWE. The Year 0 takes places as an extra year at the start of your degree to help 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 students 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 7: Step 3 – Choose the type of course

Step 3 is to choose the type of course to study. You are probably aware you can study a single subject for your whole degree, as outlined 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. Please be aware that whilst 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 and 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 earning a wage. Having a year of experience can also have significant benefits in terms of future employment prospects, as employers often really value experience gained on placement.

Slide 8: Step 4 – Check the entry requirements

Step 4 is to carefully check the entry requirements for any courses you are considering. Somewhat confusingly, different universities may specify their entry requirements in one of two ways. However, these are basically two different ways of saying the same thing - so don't worry!

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 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. Therefore, in the UWE 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.

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 9: Universities choose you...

So, universities will make a choice of 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 is 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. Therefore, it is really important to take some time to reflect on what *you* are looking for, what *you* want from your course and university experience and what will suit *you* best. Which factors matter will be individual to each and every one of you, which reflects how unique a decision this is. Over the next few slides, I am going to outline the main factors you will need to consider in your decision-making process.

Slide 10: Step 5 – Factors to consider when choosing a specific course

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

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

Another key factor here is course content. It is critical to research this to ensure you know what you will be studying on a particular course and to check it matches your interests. It is really important to note here that not all degrees will include exactly the same content even though they have same course title. Whilst 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. Therefore, detailed research is key to avoid any unwanted surprises.

By this stage in your educational journey, you are probably aware of how you perform best in terms of being assessed: whether you prefer exams, coursework or practical assessment for example. Different courses will vary with regard to this which might possibly 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.

Two related factors to consider are placement opportunities and employer links. Employer related contact is an important part of many courses but this can vary by university and geographical location. For example, around the Bristol area is a real hub 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.

Two more useful factors to think about are graduate destinations and student satisfaction. Destinations refers to information on what previous students completing a course have gone on to do subsequently, so for example whether they are in employment, further study or are

unemployed. In terms of satisfaction, all students are asked on completing their degree for feedback on all aspects of their university experience, including the teaching, student support, assessment and facilities, to name but a few. 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 11: Step 6 – Factors to consider when choosing a uni

The final step in this process, step 6, is to consider the following factors which are all about making a choice of 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 of you may be more inclined to stay local to the area you live currently. Linked to location is whether the university is based in the city centre, where the uni buildings are interspersed with those of 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 can be helpful in making a decision. More on this later.

In terms of financial considerations, 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 is 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, which they don't have to pay back, unlike any student loans you take out. To find out more about what is available, I thoroughly 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 may wish 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 12: Create your own league table

Hopefully you should now be starting to crystallise in your mind 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 process. I recommend that you do this detailed research by creating your own personal league table. You could use an Excel spreadsheet which you can easily 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 13: University open days

A key part of the decision-making process is attending open days, which can really help 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. These are typically held either side of the summer holidays. The website opendays.com has full listings of when all the open days are taking place. These are definitely worth attending at those universities you have shortlisted through your research, offering lots of useful insight to help you select your final 5 choices.

Slide 16: Finding the information

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.

I encourage you to try and use a range of resources. Firstly, you can use either the UCAS website or the Student 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 comprehensive 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 Student 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 provide reassurance about where your course could lead. All of these resources will be helpful for completing your league table as described a moment ago.

Slide 17: Good luck!

So, we've reached the end of the session. 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.