

Thinking about Higher Education?

An introductory guide to university and
college for young people



HELOA
HIGHER EDUCATION LIAISON OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

Are you:

- About to choose your year 10 options?
- In years 10 or 11?
- Starting to think about what you might do when you leave school?

If so, this booklet is for you!

This booklet is designed to answer many of the questions you may have about higher education and to help you plan ahead.

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Please remember – this booklet is only a general guide and the information provided is correct at the time of going to press. Individual institutions may have different requirements, and the entrance requirements of all universities and colleges are likely to change from year to year. So, if you are aged 13 or 14 now, the student funding arrangements, entry requirements and course descriptions may be different by the time you are ready to apply to university or college.



What is higher education?

Higher education is the term used to describe courses of study in universities and colleges that are at a higher level than you can do at school, which lead to qualifications called degrees or diplomas.

Most people start higher education courses at age 17 or 18, after studying in the sixth form (Years 12 & 13) at school, or at college. Some students may decide to take a **year out** first or may even come back to studying later in life as a mature student.

Higher education courses are available at a wide range of universities and colleges all over the UK, and there are currently more than 50,000 courses and 300 different places to choose from.

Is it for me?

Why not? About a third of school/college leavers currently go on to higher education and the government's aim is for half of all young people to have that opportunity within the next few years.

Why go to university or college?

For a variety of reasons:

■ To study a particular subject in more depth

You may already enjoy a particular subject at school - like English, French, chemistry, maths or music, or you may want to branch out into a new area - e.g. to study surveying because you like geography, or zoology because you enjoy biology.

■ The career you are interested in may require a degree level qualification

To become a doctor, dentist, architect, town planner, teacher, lawyer or chartered engineer, for example. Or you may be interested in one of the many high-level (and more highly paid!) jobs that are open to people with degrees or diplomas - in management, marketing, banking, administration etc.

■ For the “university experience” – higher education isn’t just about studying

Being a student at university or college widens your experience of the world - you meet new people from all over the UK and overseas and from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures. You are also offered a range of exciting opportunities for your social life as well as your studies, and you have the opportunity to leave home if you want to! This makes your time in higher education an all-round experience as well as a chance to develop a range of skills, which are highly valued by employers.



What's life like as a student?

Ask 10 different students that question and you'll almost certainly get 10 different answers! Most students will probably tell you that at university or college you have a lot more freedom than you had at school, and that this makes you more independent and self-confident.

■ **Studying:** For a start you'll have chosen the subject(s) that you really enjoy, which makes a big difference from school! You'll have a weekly timetable, with a number of **lectures** where large numbers of students make notes and listen to the information given by the lecturer; and **tutorials**, which are in smaller groups and probably more like the lessons that you are familiar with. In some subjects there will also be more practical sessions, in laboratories or design studios for example. But a lot of the week is likely to be **private study time** where you are expected to do work on your own, preparing for a group discussion or an essay by reading about a topic, or working through some problems.

■ **Accommodation:** You may also be living away from home. Many students, even if they go to a local university or college, choose not to live at home in order to be more independent. Most universities and many colleges of higher education make this easier by providing accommodation for many of their students, especially in their first year. Accommodation could be in a **hall of residence** with places for large numbers of students, or in a shared house or flat, normally with a small group of other students. You usually get your own study-bedroom and pay rent to the university or college. In halls of residence meals may be provided at set times or you may cook for yourself; in a flat or house you will have to do your own cooking. You can of course choose to live at home whilst studying at a local university if you want to.

■ **Social activities:** Universities and colleges have lots of social activities going on all the time. Every university and college has a Students' Union, which provides places to meet, eat and drink, as well as organising regular entertainment such as club nights and live music. They also run a huge variety of clubs and societies, which range from sports clubs, community action groups, student newspapers and radio stations, to chocolate societies, political and religious groups and even mountain boarding clubs! There are also student drama societies and music groups of all kinds (from choirs and orchestras, to helping out backstage as a "roadie" at gigs), which anyone with interest and enthusiasm can join. Sometimes it feels as if the biggest problem is finding time to do some work!

■ **Support:** Being independent doesn't mean that there's no-one to turn to for help. If you do find it difficult to organise your new routine – for example balancing your social life and work, or managing financially on the money available to you – you can get advice from people like your personal tutor in the department where you're studying, the warden in your hall of residence or the welfare officer at the university.



What courses can I study?

In most subjects, a degree course lasts three or four years, or longer if you choose to study a professional course such as medicine, dentistry or architecture. If you choose to study part-time while working, there are many ways to do this and course lengths may vary. Whilst studying for a degree, you will be known as an **under-graduate**. At the end of the course you are awarded a degree in the subject that you have studied. A person who has a degree is called a **graduate**.

Some people choose instead to follow a two-year Foundation Degree or a higher education diploma course, which are available at some universities and in many colleges. In some circumstances it may be possible to transfer to a degree course once you have been awarded a diploma.

Most universities and colleges offer courses in a very wide range of subjects, and there are literally thousands to choose from.

You can study any subject that you have already studied at school, or you can try something new.

- For example, if you are good at biology and chemistry you might like to study medicine, microbiology, physiological sciences, marine biology, environmental science, agriculture or human nutrition, to name just a few.

- If you enjoy history at school, you might choose a course in archaeology, ancient history, egyptology, classical studies, politics or international relations.

- Skills in maths or physics could prepare you to study engineering, astronomy or economics.

- Many other subjects are on offer too. For example: art and design, computer science, travel & tourism, media studies, music technology, architecture, physiotherapy, sports science, law or business management.

You don't have to choose just one subject. **Joint** or **dual honours** courses let you combine two subjects (e.g. history and politics, business and French, physics and maths) and some **combined studies** courses can be even more flexible. Most universities and colleges now use a **modular** structure for many of their qualifications. This means that their courses consist of units called modules, which are combined to make up a complete degree, diploma or foundation degree programme, which often makes it easy to study a selection of modules from different subjects within your single qualification.

The University year is in most cases split into two **semesters**, which are made up of 12 weeks teaching and three weeks for revision and exams (e.g. September to December, with exams in January, and February to May, with exams in June). Many courses are also assessed by coursework and assessments throughout the term and the number of exams you have, will depend on the course that you have chosen.

Some courses include a whole year or a number of shorter periods working in industry or business. These are often known as **sandwich** courses. Other courses, like modern languages usually include a year working or studying abroad. Many courses in a wide variety of other subjects also offer you the opportunity to study abroad, as part of an **exchange programme**.

Where will I study?

That will be up to you. You'll have to choose not only what subject to study but also which universities or colleges to apply to.

- Some are in the centre of large cities, and some are located in the countryside.
- Some are split between several sites, and others are on purpose built, self-contained sites or campuses.
- They vary in size and style and each has its own special atmosphere.

You can choose to apply anywhere in the UK, regardless of where your home is. Many students make the most of the opportunity to leave home, but others will decide to continue living with their family.

How will I choose?

Each university and college produces a book (free of charge) called a **prospectus** which gives details of all its degree and diploma programmes, entrance requirements and other important things like accommodation, sports and social facilities and what the nearest city/town is like. This information will also be available in greater detail on the university or college's website.

By reading prospectuses/websites and visiting universities and colleges for open days, you'll be able to work out what you want to study and where. You'll also find out what grades you will normally need to get in. Your school or college and your local Connexions Service or careers office will also offer further help and guidance.

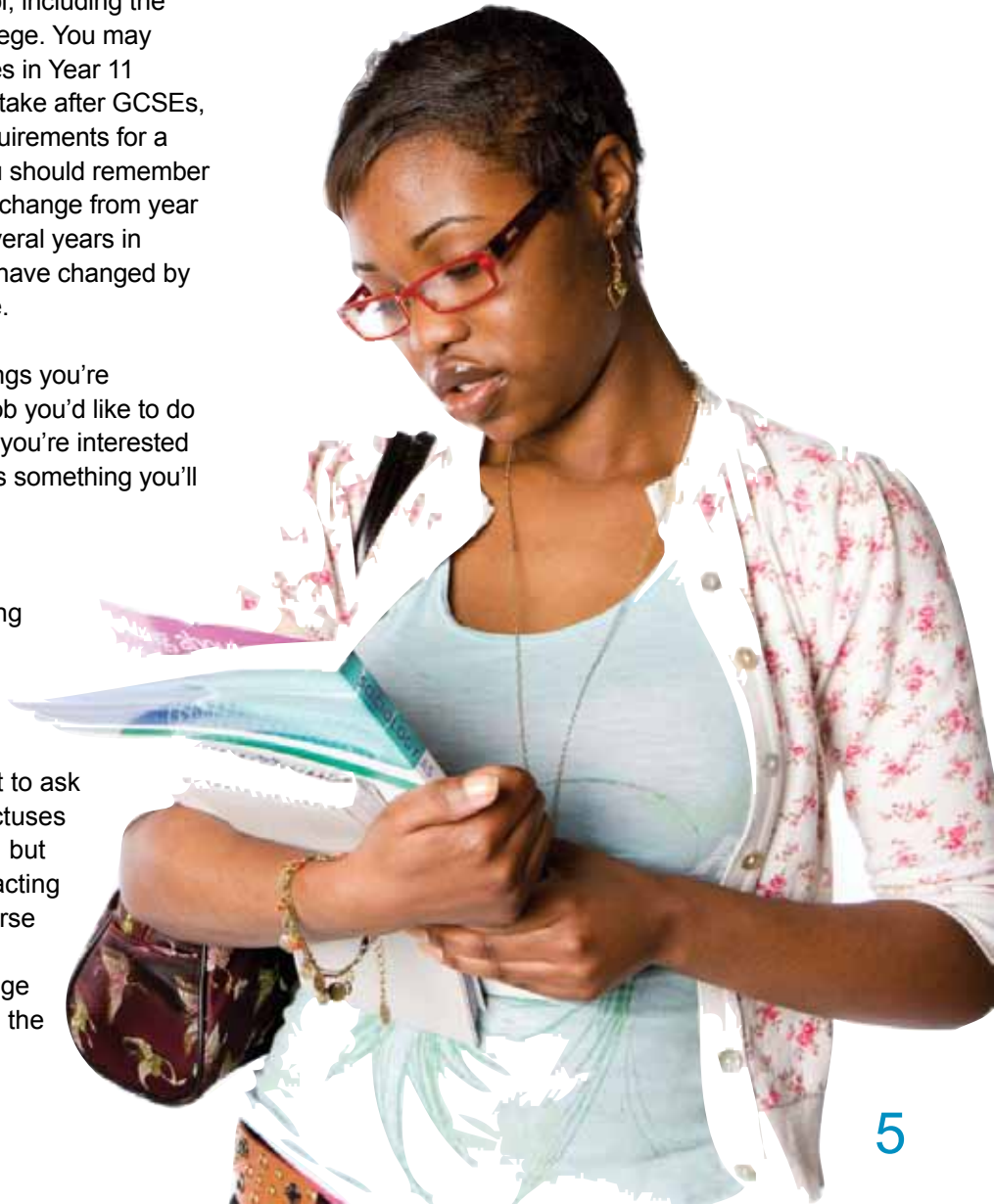


When will I choose?

It's never too early to start thinking about higher education. You'll have the chance to speak to careers teachers and advisors in Years 10 or 11 to discuss what you might do when you leave school, including the possibility of going on to university or college. You may find it helpful to look at a few prospectuses in Year 11 when you are deciding which subjects to take after GCSEs, (or equivalent), see if they fit with the requirements for a course you're interested in. However, you should remember that courses and entry requirements can change from year to year, so if you look at a prospectus several years in advance, the details will almost certainly have changed by the time you apply to university or college.

It's important in this time to try out the things you're interested in. Talk to people who do the job you'd like to do or students who have studied the course you're interested in. This way, it will help you to decide if it's something you'll enjoy and/or be good at.

Once you're in Year 12 you will need to do some serious research by consulting higher education directories, guides and individual prospectuses, as well as visiting universities and colleges on their [open days](#) and attending a [Higher Education Convention](#) where you will get to ask universities about their courses. Prospectuses are kept in most school careers libraries, but you can also get your own copy by contacting any university or college. You can of course also access most of the information you will need online on the university or college website, where you'll probably also have the option to order a paper prospectus.



When and how will I apply?

You'll usually apply during the autumn of Year 13 (or college equivalent), the year before you want to start your course. There is only one application form, but you can use it to apply for up to five choices of course/ institution. Everyone applies through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service ([UCAS](#)) and you'll be given plenty of help and support from school or college when the time comes.

What subjects should I take if I want to go to university or college later?

This is a sensible question, but it's a difficult one to answer because it can depend on what you will want to study in several years time. Obviously there's a big difference in what you will need to study music and what you need to study microbiology. However, there is some general advice we can offer:

- Remember that to get into university or college you'll need good GCSE (or equivalent) grades, followed by good grades at A-level (or equivalent),— and you're likely to do best in subjects you enjoy and are good at.
- Try to take subjects that will give you a good general education – a broad base from which you can choose what you want to study later on. Your school curriculum will ensure that you can study a wide spread of subjects: e.g. English, maths, science, history/geography. You may also be able to take extra subjects to follow your particular interests and abilities (e.g. music, drama, art or a foreign language).
- If you already know what you're likely to want to study in higher education, it would be sensible to check with your teachers to see if there are any particular subjects that you need for that course.



And after year 11?

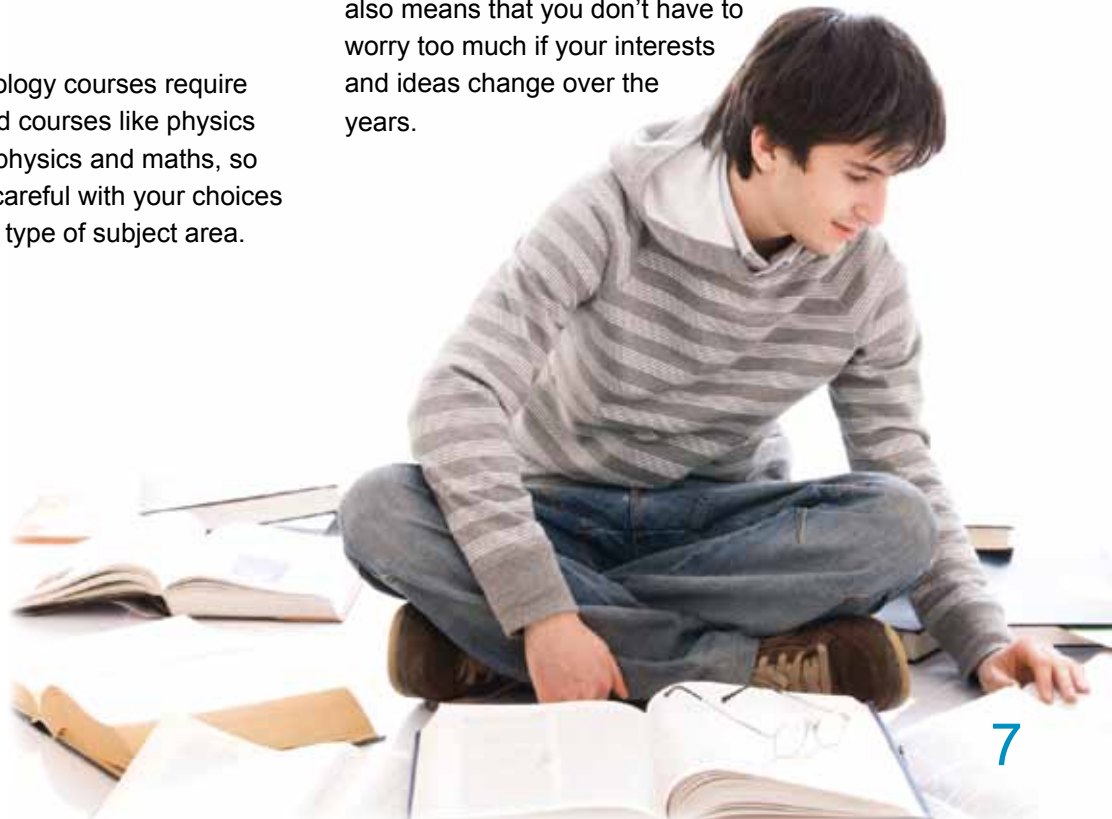
When you come to choose your A-level (or equivalent) subjects, you may already know what you'll want to study later. If so, you should check in university or college prospectuses to see which subjects are most appropriate for you to take. If you don't know what you want to do later on, it is probably best to take the subjects you do best in and enjoy most. You should also ask your teachers if you are choosing a sensible combination of subjects. You might like to look in a number of university or college prospectuses as well, to see what a balanced choice of subjects would enable you to do later, and what sort of grades you'd need to get. Subject requirements for many courses are common sense, for example you would need French to study French and history to study history etc!

You'll find though that a lot of biology courses require chemistry as well as biology, and courses like physics or engineering often need both physics and maths, so you may need to be a bit more careful with your choices if you might be interested in this type of subject area.

What if I choose the “wrong” subjects?

If you take one group of subjects at A-level (or equivalent), – for example, geography, history and English – and later realise that you should have done science subjects, don't despair! Some universities run foundation year courses to help you **convert** to science or engineering and even to medicine and dentistry if you have done the “wrong” A-level (or equivalent) subjects.

And of course many degrees may not require any specific subjects at A-level (or equivalent), so for these it will not matter which subjects you have taken. So, while you should try and plan ahead sensibly, you'll probably be able to find a suitable university or college course, whatever school subjects you choose. This also means that you don't have to worry too much if your interests and ideas change over the years.



What qualifications will I need?

Post-16 qualifications:

Most people stay on at school in the sixth form or go to college for two years after doing their GCSEs (or equivalent). Many of them take two or three A-levels (starting with AS and going on to A2), whilst others may opt to study for an equivalent vocational qualification. There are many other equivalent qualifications that students may study for, including the [Diploma](#), [International Baccalaureate](#), [Welsh Baccalaureate](#) or [Scottish Highers](#).

Specific subjects:

Each course at university has its own specific entry requirements. For example, you would normally need to study A-level (or equivalent) history for two years in order to study history, and the same principle applies to subjects like French and geography etc. If you want to study medicine you will need to study a couple of science subjects, usually including chemistry and/or biology and for many engineering courses you may need both maths and physics.

There are also many courses that do not require any particular subjects and this is because you will start the subject from scratch at university. For some courses, such as psychology, a science or maths background may be helpful. For others, a mixture of arts and science A-levels may be desirable. For all these courses you will need good grades in whatever subjects you have taken and you will have to show that you really are the right sort of person to do well in that subject. In Scotland (where many degree courses last four years rather than three) it may not be necessary to study a particular school subject before studying that subject at university or college.



14-16 qualifications:

In general, it is helpful if you have passes in a good range of GCSE subjects, at grade C or above, or a good pass in the Higher Diploma, as this gives universities and colleges a good indication of your academic ability. Most universities and colleges will require you to have gained grade C or above in English Language at GCSE (or equivalent) as part of their general requirements for entry (institutions in Wales accept Welsh Language at grade C as an alternative). Some courses may also require at least a grade B/C in GCSE maths (e.g. for economics or business studies) or in a foreign language (e.g. European business management).

If you are considering a career in teaching it is a government requirement to have gained a grade C GCSE (or equivalent) pass in both maths and English, and in addition to this you will need a science subject in order to teach at primary level.

Grades needed:

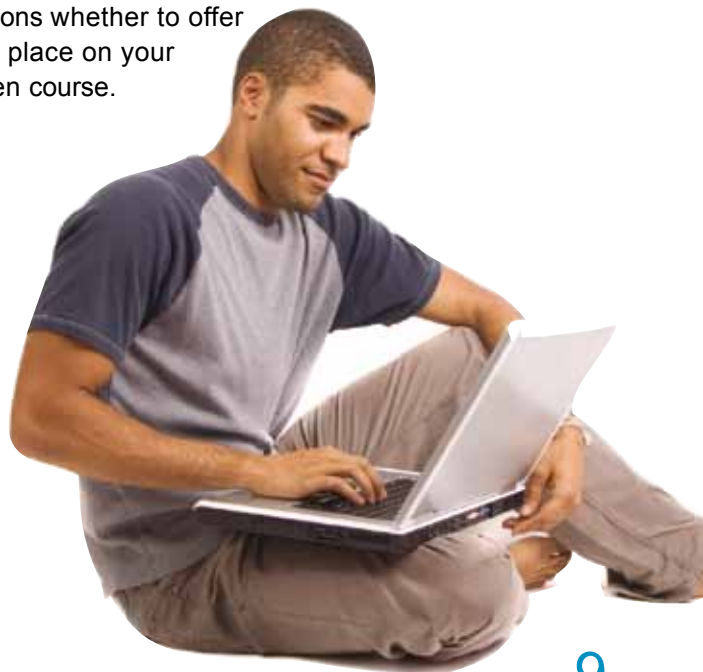
The grades that you will need vary depending on the subject and the university you may be interested in. Some universities will ask you to achieve certain grades in your strongest two or three A-levels, (or equivalent), whilst others may use the [UCAS tariff points system](#), where you get points for each grade you achieve which contribute towards an overall total. Using either of these methods, the university may still set certain grades for you to achieve in particular subjects.

Some courses are extremely popular and may have very high entry requirements. Before you apply, you will need to find out the current [typical offer](#) for the courses you are interested in and make sure that you are expecting to achieve the necessary results.

You will be able to look in official guidebooks and university prospectuses/websites to find out about entry qualifications and the Admissions Office at each institution will be able to provide you with information about specific courses.

What else do universities and colleges look for?

When you apply for a place at a university or college, admissions staff will also look at what you have done outside your studies – your hobbies and interests both in school/college and outside. They take notice of experiences such as work placements or voluntary work and any positions of responsibility that you may have held either in school or elsewhere. This additional background information helps to build up as complete a picture of you as possible, and contributes to decisions whether to offer you a place on your chosen course.



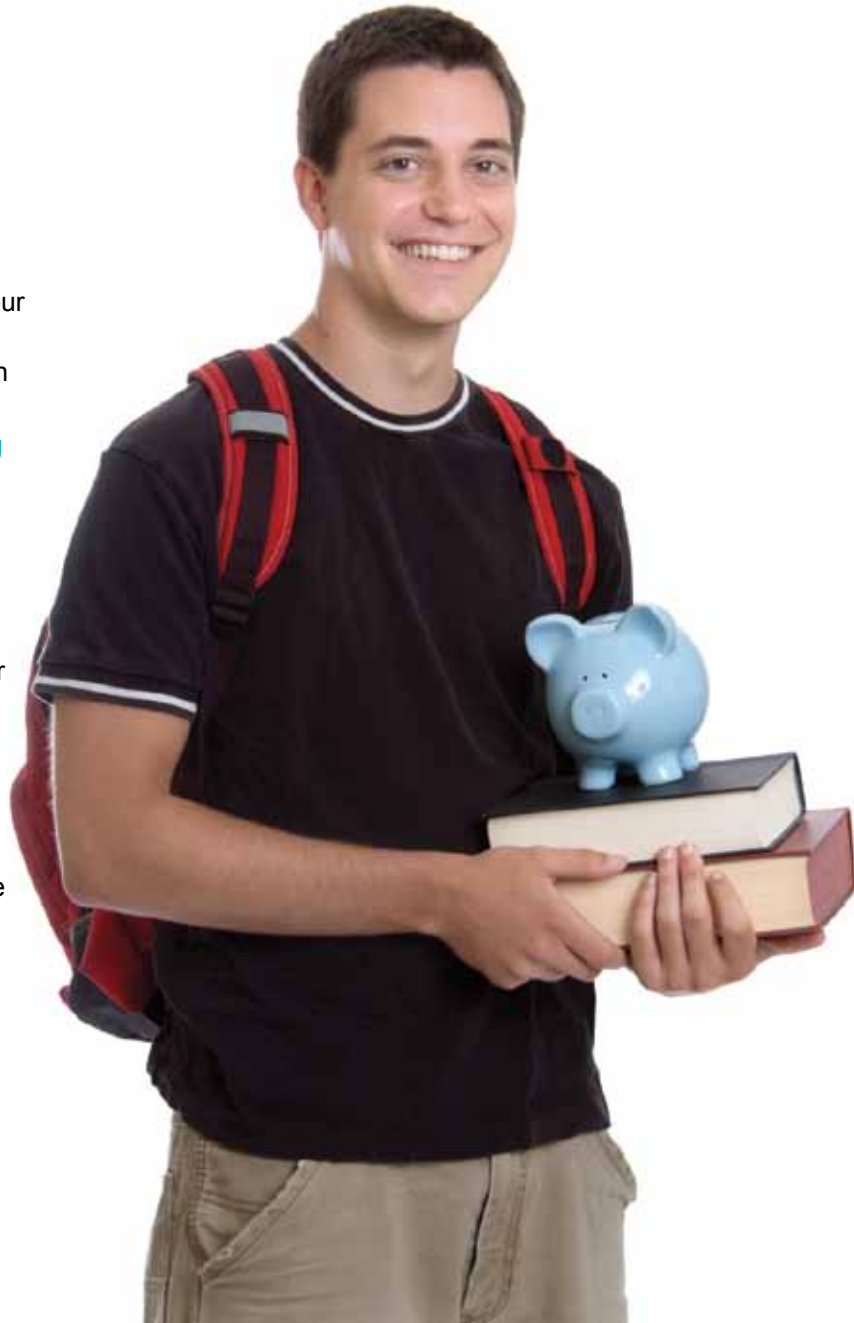
What about the cost?

Over the last few years there have been a number of changes in the ways that university and college students are financed, and there may be further changes before you leave school. This information covers the current arrangements for students starting university from 2010 onwards in England and Wales.

No student, or their family, is expected to have their own funds to support them through University. This means that you don't need to worry about whether your family can afford it. You can study first, and only have to pay anything back when you are earning more than £15,000. There are two main areas of cost you need to be aware of – the [tuition fee](#) (course fee) and [living costs](#).

There will be help available from the government in the form of [Student Grants](#) and [Student Loans](#). These are a special type of loan from the [Student Loans Company](#), with repayment levels linked to your income once you are earning.

There will also be a range of [bursaries](#) and other financial support available from the universities and colleges. Some health-related courses are funded by NHS Bursaries for part of their programme, and those students have both their fees and may have part of their living costs paid for by the NHS.



■ Tuition fees:

No-one will have to pay any fees either at the start of the course or while they are studying (although you can do if you want to!). This means that your family doesn't need to worry about whether they can afford for you to go to university.

Instead, you will be able to borrow the money through the student loans system, which you will only have to pay back after you leave university and only if you are earning more than £15,000 a year.

■ Living costs:

In England and Wales the government could provide you with a [student maintenance grant](#), if your family income is below a certain level, which you do not have to pay back. You can also borrow money each year from the [Student Loans Company](#), which you do need to pay back once you are earning.

Most universities and colleges also have bursaries and scholarships on offer to help students fund their course. It is worth having a look at their websites to find out what is available at each institution.

Many students also choose to work part-time whilst studying to earn extra money and there are student employment schemes in many universities and colleges, which can help you to find suitable work. If you want more information now, you can ask your careers teacher or look on the internet (see back page for some useful addresses), but you must also obtain up-to-date information in the year when you apply to university or college.

You have to look at higher education as an investment in your future. As a graduate you should find that there are a much wider range of interesting and better paid career opportunities available to you, and you should remember that you only start paying back your student loan when you are earning more than £15,000. On top of that, if you make the most of your time in Higher Education, [student life](#) should be worth every penny!



How can I find out more about higher education?

Your school or college careers advisors or your local Connexions office or Careers Office will be able to give you lots of help and advice about applying to university or college. Also, all universities and colleges arrange activities and events to help school pupils find out more about higher education (for example: workshops, master-classes, campus tours, visits to schools, student shadowing, taster courses and summer schools etc). You may also find that your school or college will arrange for someone from your local university to come and talk to your year group about higher education choices and the application process.

When you get to Year 12, you may want to visit a university to see for yourself what it's like. Most universities and colleges organise open days and details are sent to all schools and colleges. You should also have an opportunity to attend a Higher Education Convention in your region, where you will be able to talk to representatives from a large number of universities and colleges and find out details about their degree and diploma courses.

Your school careers library has copies of all university and college prospectuses, as well as a range of general guides such as "University and College Entrance: The Official Guide". There are also some useful websites listed on the inside back page.

If you'd like your own copy of a prospectus or further information about individual courses, you should contact the Schools Liaison or Student Recruitment and Admissions Office at the relevant university or college, or you could visit their website.



Find out more about higher education and available support

- www.aimhigher.ac.uk – information about why higher education could be right for you.
- www.aimhigher.ac.uk/Uni4me/home – more info about what higher education has to offer.
- www.apprenticeships.org.uk – Apprentices work and study at the same time. This website lets you know everything you need about apprenticeships and work-based learning.
- www.thebrightsidetrust.org – The Brightside Trust is an educational charity that offers e-mentoring and work experience for young people thinking of higher education.
- www.connexions-direct.com – information and advice for young people.
- www.findfoundationdegree.co.uk – information about what a foundation degree is and where they are available.
- www.learnirect.co.uk – offers ways into studying towards a degree while working full-time.
- www.skill.org.uk – a national charity which helps young people with any kind of impairment in post-16 education, training and employment.

Information on applying and choosing your course

- www.ucas.com – the official site for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Find out what courses are available, where they are and how to apply.

- www.hotcourses.com – a directory of all courses available.
- www.opendays.com – this site lists open days for most UK higher education institutions.
- www.unistats.com – this site enables you to compare courses and institutions.

Understanding student finance

- www.dcsf.gov.uk/studentssupport – the official government information about current student funding.
- www.uniaid.org.uk – a charity which helps students by providing information about funding further study.
- <http://unimoney.direct.gov.uk> – useful advice about student finance.

Find out more about student life

- www.fullonmag.co.uk – online version of Full-On magazine, a magazine for young people at school or college.
- www.nusonline.co.uk – the website for the National Union of Students.
- www.realuni.com – an alternative look at higher education, written by current students for prospective students.
- www.studentzone.org.uk – Student life explained.
- www.yougo.co.uk – top student tips to prepare you for higher education.

With over 50,000 different courses and over 300 institutions to choose from, choices regarding progression into university or college can be difficult to make. And what are the reasons for going on to higher education in the first place?

The Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA) is an organisation that deals specifically in the provision of this kind of information and guidance, with members from Universities and Colleges throughout the UK. We offer free and impartial advice and can advise students, their families, careers officers and teachers about the range of options available, welfare issues and the latest developments in Higher Education. For more information about HELOA and the services that our members offer, please visit our website www.heloa.ac.uk

HELOA Office
External Relations
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester
Essex CO4 3SQ
www.heloa.ac.uk

heloa@essex.ac.uk
tel: 01206 873955
fax: 0871 661 5779



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