

Applying To University Via UCAS

Applying for university is both nerve-racking and exciting for students as they plan their futures and think about post-school options. University in the UK is often better suited to students who already know what they would like to study as they must choose a course when they apply. By contrast, students in America can study many subjects while they decide what to focus on.



As a college counsellor at ACS Cobham International School, I have helped numerous students through the university application process which can at first seem daunting but is actually much more streamlined than it first appears.

In the UK, applications are made online via UCAS – the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. A visit to the www.ucas.com is an essential first port of call providing excellent guidance for applicants - and their parents and guardians.

Applicants must first register with UCAS Apply to create their own personal UCAS 'account' complete with user name, password and security questions. Buzzwords, which will be used during the application process, should be provided to students from their school counsellor or administrator as a way to connect the student's application to their high school. UCAS Apply allows applicants to save and store their information as they go. Nothing is sent to UCAS until the submit button is pressed – still some way off at this stage.

In addition to information such as contact details and qualifications, a personal statement is required. This comprises a 4000-character essay presenting ambitions, interests, successes, and the applicant's rationale for choosing a particular course. Sometimes just thinking about their personal statement can send students into a blind panic, but it's actually nothing like as onerous as it sounds, and we will consider a bit later what universities look for and what to include.

Applicants may choose to apply for up to five universities (four if applying to study medicine, dentistry or veterinary sciences). Predicated exam grades will help decide which to choose, but we advise some variation to allow for higher or lower than anticipated grades. Don't forget, applicants might not receive offers from all five universities so it's important that all five institutions are equally carefully selected. Ideally applicants will have visited each institution beforehand which will

help with their decision making.

After submitting the completed application form, the seemingly long wait for offers begins. Places are offered either conditionally, pending actual exam results, or unconditionally if the applicant has already achieved the required grades.

From their received offers, applicants must then select two universities to proceed with and decline the other offers. A 'firm' and 'insurance' decision has to be made by a given date that is dictated by when the last admissions decision is received by the student.

If subsequent exam grades meet the offer requirements, all well and good. If they are below expected and do not meet the course requirements, applicants should check with the university first (they may be lenient) but, failing that, can apply to other institutions through a process known as Clearing.

All applications received by UCAS after 6pm on June 30 automatically enter the Clearing process with no further offers being made until exam results are known. This underlines the importance of getting applications underway early!

Course vacancies remaining and available through Clearing are presented on the UCAS website but applicants must liaise with the universities directly to apply. Both parties, applicant and university, then confirm acceptance through UCAS.

While the Clearing process starts officially in July, activity escalates massively in mid-August when A level results are announced. For those who lose out on a place by missing the required grades, the plan is generally to find an alternative place through Clearing as quickly as possible so it is a busy few days post exam results.

If, however, an applicant's grades are higher than predicted, they may wish to try for a course more closely aligned to their higher grades. They can do this through the UCAS Adjustment process which allows them to apply for alternative places without

jeopardising existing offers. Places available through Adjustment tend to be very limited and are not listed – applicants must research in advance where they may like to go and approach each university individually.

WHAT DO ADMISSIONS PERSONNEL LOOK FOR IN APPLICANTS?

The annual ACS University Admissions Officers Report presents research conducted amongst university admission officers and explores the qualities they look for in prospective students in addition to exam results.

While good written English and a reasonable grasp of Maths are essential, most look specifically for evidence of a genuine passion for the chosen subject, plus a positive attitude towards study, and an ability to think and work independently. They will also look at work experience undertaken, and be interested to see evidence of activities demonstrating initiative, responsibility or leadership.

A clear passion for the chosen subject was cited by 98 per cent of UK admissions officers as important or very important. Applicants can demonstrate this by presenting current and past study of subjects related to their chosen field, but also through work experience or hobbies undertaken beyond academia but still related to the chosen subject.

As a rule of thumb, a personal statement should be 80 per cent related to the chosen course of study while 20 per cent should reference co-curricular activities, such as sports, clubs, volunteer work or personal projects. Part-time jobs, such as childcare, retail or hospitality work can be used to evidence different skills.

START EARLY!

Any student considering higher education



should start looking and preparing early. They should also be aware that different universities and courses have different application deadlines – some are much earlier than others.

A considered approach is better than a rushed approach so researching and visiting potential universities the year before applying is highly recommended. Ideally applications should be submitted by Christmas preceding the start date.

Ryan Hinchey, College Counsellor at ACS Cobham, shares his insights into applying for university in Britain.

ACS Cobham International School is part of ACS International Schools and serves international and local communities. ACS Cobham is non-sectarian, co-educational day and boarding, enrolling approximately 1400 students aged 2 to 18 years. The school is located to the South of London between Gatwick and Heathrow Airports.

The school offers a fully international curriculum including the International Baccalaureate. The school has state-of-the-art facilities and an on-going programme of building investment with impressive grounds. The strong core academic programme and extensive arts, sports and cultural activities support a student-centred philosophy.



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