



How to choose your University



At this time of year, many families (the students finishing the secondary school this year, the students who will finish in June 2022, and also their parents advising them) are taking important decisions for the future, making the choices for the future university studies.

There are many choices to be made in this context but they can be summarised in two main questions:

- What do I want to study?
- How to choose the University corresponding best to my aspirations?

The first question is simple and complicated in the same time. The most important is to select a future career that you find attractive. For this, it is necessary to attempt to see yourself in the future by making a plan and saying to yourself:

“I may study this, and then that, and in this way in 3 years (or 5 or 6 depending on the studies) with my qualifications, I can see myself as.... (Working in this or that domain,doing research,applying for such and such a position etc). Now, if the image of yourself in this future satisfies you, if you think it will give you the professional recognition

you wish to achieve, and an interesting occupation, then go ahead, follow this path. But if not, think again and choose another path, start this little exercise again. It is important to always ask yourself why you may opt for these studies instead of others. It is of paramount importance to undertake studies in a domain that you like, and which will lead you where you wish to go.



As an example, if you hate addition and multiplication, do not attempt to become an accountant even if the prospect of finding a good job later is high. If you like to help others, then medicine is an option, if you are prepared to study hard. As a rule, it is wise to always check the employability aspect of the studies you plan to undertake – are the job prospects reasonable?

If there is no data available on the internet, then try to answer this simple question: are there companies, organisations, or individuals ready to pay me something decent if I acquire this set of skills and knowledge? Or if with these studies I am not interesting as an employee, can I envisage to earn my bread (and my caviar) working as an independent, self-employed person?

So now having decided on the kind of studies you wish to pursue, you can proceed to the search for the best university for you.

I insist on this term the “**best for you**” because like many things in life, in this case also, there is no “One size fit all”.

First, take into account that a given course can have a different professional recognition, or if you will, a different perception, depending on the university delivering the degree. A law degree (say) from Oxford UK, and a law degree from a “less famous” university, have not the same “prestige” on the work market. But of course, the entry requirements are also different, varying from a virtually “mission impossible” prospect of admission for (say) Oxford, to a more reasonable prospect of acceptance of your application in other, less famous places. This difference in “prestige” is not always important. I have met many persons who made great careers with degrees from “less famous” universities. However, a degree from a “prestigious” institution is actually a particularly good asset.

For this reason, I have a tendency to recommend applying for “prestigious” universities. However, in order to increase your chances and avoid frustration, you must check carefully if the entry requirements are realistic for the grades you are likely to get. Do not hesitate to apply to many universities (and possibly to many countries) so as to increase your chances

for success. When applying therefore, use always a “mix” of applications to prestigious and to less prestigious universities, in order to be on the safe side.

One way to have an idea of the “prestige” of a given degree is to use the “University rankings” (or League tables). There are many such rankings, such as the well known Chinese “QS World University Rankings 2021, or the “CWUR.org ([World University Rankings 2020-21 | CWUR](http://WorldUniversityRankings2020-21.CWUR)), or the “Times” rankings (www.timeshighereducation.com), or the “HIGH FLIERS” a site specialising for the United Kingdom. When using these rankings, it is better to search “by subject” because the classification changes a lot depending on the subject. Also, you must bear in mind that because of the criteria used by these ranking systems, they have a clear tendency to reflect the vision of the “anglophone world”. Excellent universities in France, in Switzerland and elsewhere are often not listed in a way that reflects their real value and reputation. A good example concerns the prestigious “Ecole Polytechnique” and the Sorbonne, both listed surprisingly low in many rankings.

For this reason, I strongly recommend to use these “rankings / classifications” with caution and not take them at face value. There are also “alternative ranking systems” based on how “green” is the University ([UI GreenMetric | World University Rankings](http://UIGreenMetricWorldUniversityRankings)), or how safe it is estimated to be, etc. You can find this data easily on the web, depending on what is important for you.

Once you have made a short list of possible destinations, ask the views of your family and extended family, of your teachers, school advisers, and if possible, students. Ask their advice. You can find student opinions on Facebook, on blogs, on “You tube”, on students satisfaction scores etc.



When you are planning to spend some years in a place, is important to know if it is the kind of environment that seems to make you comfortable (or not). Is it safe? Are the buildings scattered all over the city or regrouped around a campus? What about the climate? Is there a welcome atmosphere for the non-nationals?

The facilities are important: Libraries with convenient opening hours, e-resources, modern laboratory facilities (for sciences). Sports centres? Cafes, student restaurants? Cultural life? Arts centres or similar? Health care facilities available for the students?

Accommodation is also important: Are there university-owned facilities? Is it necessary to use public transport, or are the distances walkable? If there is need for public transport, are the connections safe and frequent? Accommodation cost: what price-range? What's included? Is the University offering support, can you find easily affordable accommodation off campus, etc. If it is possible, envisage to reserve accommodation before the result of your application is available. If you are not admitted to this specific university, you can always cancel the reservation, often without cost.

Have a look to the social aspects: Are there Students Associations / Unions? Sports associations? Culture societies? Activity societies? Personal tutoring? etc.



Possibly you could receive offers from universities located in big cities and also in smaller centres of population. If you opt for the big city, remember that the big city offers a lot of entertainment, amenities, and often part-time job opportunities. But the cost of living can be much higher, and life can be more stressful and “student life” can be more limited. The small city offers usually more affordable accommodation, less traffic problems, lower cost of living, cheaper outings, and often more opportunities for sport. Often the small city is safer than the big city and permits in general to focus better on your studies. Socialization with the other students is in general easier in the smaller places.

If you have the opportunity, participate in an “Open doors event”, (you can find the dates on the universities websites). In this way, you can evaluate the place with your own eyes.

Concerning the financing of your studies, it is wise to make a budget and investigate the cost of university fees, the cost of accommodation, transport, travel, and the minimum necessary “pocket money”. Remember some estimates of the cost of living given by some websites are extremely optimistic. Very frequently, you must increase them by 50% or even estimate for a doubling.



Coming back to admission requirements, it is necessary to be vigilant in order not to miss special requirements for some types of studies. These can differ from one country to another. These are often related to examinations demonstrating the level of knowledge of the teaching language. It is advisable to pass in good time any necessary exams so as to be able to present in good time the required certificates. In this way, you will avoid finding yourself excluded or under stress to take an exam at a moment that might not suit you.

Several universities have special tests which are a requirement for admission to some faculties. These tests are common for access to degree studies with high requirements, such as Medicine (Example: the “UCAT” test for medical studies in the UK), Engineering, Veterinary, Pharmacy, Law, sometimes architecture etc. If you aim for these types of studies, inform yourself carefully on any necessary tests and the relevant deadlines.

Currently more and more countries have central websites where the applications are submitted. UK has UCAS, France has “Parcoursup”, Ireland has CAO (Central Applications Office), Greece has a similar system for the Greeks abroad etc. Take the time to carefully study the website, carefully read the instructions, complete your applications with great care because any error can be “fatal” and lead to exclusion. Above all, do not miss the relevant deadlines. If your school is helping you with the applications, be as cooperative as possible.

I cannot close this brief “Vademecum” without reference to the impact of Brexit on university entrance. Indeed, the United Kingdom (UK) has been over the years one of the most frequent options for university studies for many “continental” EU students. As foreseen,

the UK's departure from the EU has consequences also for third level education. If you plan to study in the UK, please take into account:

- The increased fees for the Bachelor degree and the even more increased fees for the Masters.
- It will be more complicated and difficult to stay and work in the UK after your studies (if indeed you have such a plan).
- No member of your family will be permitted to live with you during your studies.
- The UK is not participating any more in the student exchange programme, Erasmus+ .
- The access to student loans for EU students remains uncertain at present, information for now remains contradictory.
- The recognition of the UK diplomas is not covered anymore by the European Union Directives.
- There are now many European Union countries where universities are offering many courses of study and degrees in the English language. Apart from the Republic of Ireland, these include the Netherlands, France, Italy, Cyprus and many others, all EU countries with excellent universities and in general low tuition fees, and therefore a valid alternative to the UK for those wishing to pursue studies in the English language.



Hoping that these few lines could help support you in your choices, all the U4U team wish you all possible success with your applications and your future academic career.