

# Applying to HE

How to help your students excel in the university applications process

## Timeline for 2012

### The perfect application

### Best practice advice

UCAS

SecEd

## What makes a perfect university application? We look at the dos and don'ts for students hoping to make it to higher education and the resources and support available from UCAS to help both teachers and their students

There is no such thing as the “perfect” university application when submitting your forms to UCAS. Each individual is considered by universities on his or her own merit.

But every student needs to submit the perfect application for them.

That means ensuring all the relevant sections are filled out, care is taken over spelling, grammar and punctuation, and forms are submitted by the appropriate deadlines.

The reference should be written by someone who knows the applicant well, such as a teacher, tutor or the headteacher.

Friends or family members are not permitted to write the reference – it may invalidate the application. The information contained should include details of the applicant’s achievements, suitability for the course, career plans and, if relevant, information relating to specific learning needs (a university may need to consider these).

One of the most important parts of the UCAS application form is the personal statement. This is where applicants speak about themselves, outlining why they have chosen a particular course, and giving information about their hobbies, interests and any additional certificates or qualifications they may have gained to support their application.

Sometimes, the information in personal statements is used as the basis for an interview, so the applicants should be prepared to answer questions relating to it. They should also check the Entry Profile of the course they are applying for, as this will specify what qualifications or aptitudes are required.

Admissions tutors have indicated to UCAS that poor use of language and a badly organised statement will almost certainly put off a university from offering a place. Good English – or Welsh if the student is applying only to Welsh universities or colleges – is expected from everyone, regardless of the subject they are applying for.



### The perfect personal statement

The level of emphasis and attention placed by universities on the personal statement in the admissions process varies, but applicants should work on the assumption that they consider it important. In some cases, the personal statement may be the deciding factor between applicants on over-subscribed courses. A successful personal statement will usually cover the following aspects.

### Why is the student applying to this course?

The majority of admissions tutor prefer a “front-loaded” approach, where from the first line the student sets out exactly why they are applying for the course and, in doing so, demonstrates their insight and motivation to study the subject at degree level. They should also aim to provide evidence that they fully understand what the course requirements are. For example, someone applying for a psychology course should show that they realise the course will have scientific content and, in particular, that a facility for using statistics will be very helpful. As a general rule, at least 60 per cent of your personal statement should concentrate on this task.

### Work experience

Include details of any jobs, work placements and experience or voluntary work and elaborate on what skills have been learned, and how these are relevant to the chosen course or future career path.

### Skills and achievements

Universities like to know the types of skills students have that will help them on the course, or generally at university. For example, applicants should include details of ASDAN courses, CREST awards, diplomas of achievement or Duke of Edinburgh Awards, as well as any residential courses or volunteering. Also, they should mention anything they are proud of – such as playing for the county

### Social media

Like most organisations, UCAS is now communicating with young people using the means they like best – social media.

In the past couple of years, UCAS has been expanding its presence on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, responding to queries and questions and ensuring applicants are kept fully informed.

UCAS Connect, for example, which was launched earlier this year, brings together all social media links into one place. During July and August, it proved particularly valuable in dispelling some of the myths that A level candidates had as they awaited their results.

Beth Hayes, online experience executive at UCAS, told *SecEd*: “There are myths that get passed down from older siblings and the grapevine generally about when Clearing begins, or who decides on whether a university makes an offer. Many people wrongly think that this is UCAS.”

She added: “As we move out of Clearing and into the next round of applications in the autumn, UCAS Connect will be updated with new video guides, advice and top tips.”

The UCAS call centre, meanwhile, uses social media and conventional telephone lines to liaise and communicate with applicants. Dedicated social media advisors within the call centre answer queries posted on the UCAS Facebook and Twitter pages, and on the UCAS social network, yougo. In addition, they monitor and intercept discussions about UCAS on Twitter to put anxious minds at rest. Ms Hayes added: “Quite simply, we have a small team of people answering queries online and looking out for UCAS-related hashtags, so they can step in to solve problems or clarify confusion.

“Social media has been very effective in helping us to react quickly to students’ needs. We often see people complaining they can’t find certain information, so this allows us to quickly point them in the right direction. Sometimes they are looking for answers from other students because they’re worried about ringing us and appearing ‘stupid’. Usually they have a completely legitimate concern and shouldn’t be afraid of getting in touch.

“Social media has also proved very effective for international students, who are often in different time zones, as they can send us their queries knowing we will respond as soon as we can.”

Visit: [www.ucasconnect.com](http://www.ucasconnect.com), [www.twitter.com/ucas\\_online](http://www.twitter.com/ucas_online), [www.facebook.com/ucasonline](http://www.facebook.com/ucasonline), [www.youtube.com/ucasonline](http://www.youtube.com/ucasonline) and [www.yougo.co.uk](http://www.yougo.co.uk)



Cover image: Darren Staples / Reuters



# Applying for uni: dos and don'ts

cricket team or achieving grade 6 in piano – and discuss any positions of responsibility they have held, in or out of school.

## Future plans

Applicants who already know their career path should explain how their university course may help them to achieve their aims, and what knowledge and experience they hope to gain during their time at the university.

## Old head on young shoulders

In addition to academic ability, many courses will want to reassure themselves that a student has the emotional maturity to benefit from the course – in other words, are they a thoughtful and reflective learner? They should try

rewording a couple of sentences so that they begin: “This experience taught me...”

## Hobbies and interests

Mention any hobbies and social activities that demonstrate skills and abilities, particularly if they have some relevance to the chosen degree course. Admissions tutors say the strongest applicants are those who can link their extra-curricular activities to their proposed course of study. If they enjoy sport, they should provide some context and say why – for example, it builds teamwork skills.

## Why personal statements fail

The reasons why a candidate is unsuccessful will vary, but if this is on the basis of the personal statement, it could be because:

## Preparing the Professionals

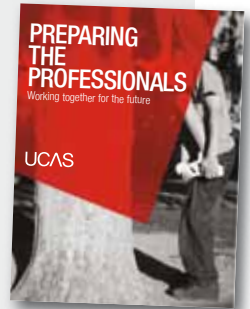
UCAS has set up a scheme to help teachers support and guide their students through the applications process.

The Preparing the Professionals project assists school and university outreach staff in providing applicants with the most up-to-date, relevant and accurate information.

The initiative recognises the important role played by higher education institutions, school liaison officers, and other professionals working in widening participation, recruitment and marketing.

The scheme was launched this year at a series of workshops around the UK, but the pack of presentational and guidance materials and student information can also be obtained directly from UCAS.

Visit: [http://ucas.com/he\\_staff/training/preparingprofessionals](http://ucas.com/he_staff/training/preparingprofessionals)



- The personal statement did not strongly support a desire to study the chosen degree.
- It did not show sufficient understanding, relevance or knowledge about the course being applied for.
- There was a lot of competition for places and the personal statement and experience was not as strong as those of other applicants.
- There was a failure to demonstrate sufficient knowledge in the subject.
- The application form (including personal statement, reference and predicted grades) did not demonstrate accurate understanding of, or motivation for, the subject.
- There was not enough strong interest in the subject area shown.

## Application timeline for 2012

**Mid-September, 2011** – Applicants can submit their forms for 2012 entry from now

**October 15, 2011** – Deadline for receipt by UCAS of applications to Oxford and Cambridge universities and all medicine, dentistry and veterinary courses

**January 15, 2012** – Deadline for receipt of applications to all other courses, apart from some art and design courses with a March 24 deadline

**February 24, 2012** – Applications can now be submitted through Extra (Extra is a way of making a further choice after a student has applied. They are eligible if they have used all five choices on their application and have either been unsuccessful in all of them, or have declined all offers)

**March 24, 2012** – Deadline for applications for art and design courses which do not have a January 15 deadline

**March 31, 2012** – Universities and colleges should aim to make their decisions by this date if the application was submitted to UCAS by January 15 (although their deadline to make a decision is May 9)

**May 9, 2012** – Applicants who received decisions from all their chosen universities and colleges by March 31 must respond to their offers by this date, otherwise their offers will be declined by UCAS

**June 30, 2012** – Applications submitted to UCAS by this deadline will be sent to the applicant's chosen universities and colleges. Applications received after this date will be entered into Clearing

**July 4, 2012** – Last date to add an Extra choice

**Mid-July, 2012** – Applicants who have been unsuccessful at all their chosen universities and colleges and those who applied after June 30 can apply for courses in Clearing if they are not waiting for exam results (particularly relevant to non-GCE A level and some Scottish students)

**August 7, 2012** – Publication of Higher and Advanced Higher results in Scotland

**August 16, 2012** – Publication of AS and A level results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Applicants receiving these results are now eligible to apply through Clearing. Applicants who meet and exceed the conditions of their firm choice can register for Adjustment

**August 16, 2012** – The Clearing vacancy search starts for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

**August 31, 2012** – Adjustment closes

**September 20, 2012** – Last day for applicants to apply in the 2012 cycle

**September 30, 2012** – Clearing vacancy search closes and applicants should contact universities with further queries

**October 22, 2012** – The last day that applicants can add a Clearing choice and universities can accept an applicant through Clearing

# Giving them every chance

*SecEd* speaks to teachers, students, parents and an admissions officer to find out how schools can best support their students through the UCAS process

**P**reparation for the UCAS process and university application begins early in many schools.

At Newstead Wood School in Bromley, year 11 pupils are expected to start thinking about university courses when they make their A level choices.

Anthony Fitzgerald, director of careers guidance at the south London secondary, explained: "Most students will have heard of UCAS even if they don't know how it all works. Some may have an idea in mind, for example, that they want to study medicine or law, so we discuss whether this is a realistic prospect. It would be too late to do this in year 12."

## Preparation days

At Newstead Wood, meetings are held with parents so they can follow their children's progress through the application system, while the school also hosts two preparation days for students focusing on the application process.

Mr Fitzgerald explained: "We have two UCAS preparation days in year 12 after they've done their AS levels, when we invite in various people to speak to students.

"For example, a representative from Surrey University came in to discuss their sandwich courses as some students will be keen on the employability aspect."

## The admissions officer

At first glance, she was the type of A-grade student any university would want. But closer scrutiny of her personal statement cost this student dearly.

"She had written that one of her favourite books was *Pride and Prejudice* by Emily Brontë," explained Rob Evans, head of admissions at Sussex University. "Needless to say, she was not offered a place."

Universities consider every application individually, Mr Evans said. In the first instance, tutors will look for academic ability and that the application meets certain prerequisites – for example, that subject choice at GCSE or A level has some relevance to the degree course.

The personal statement will be subjected to different levels of scrutiny depending on the department and is a crucial part of any application.

Mr Evans explained: "Where courses are heavily over-subscribed they might be used to decide between students. But what we particularly want to see is that the student has understood the course they are applying for. So if a history applicant writes that they are interested in ancient or medieval history, then Sussex isn't the place for them, as we don't cover those periods."

The personal statement should be analytical as well as descriptive. "It is not enough to list interests and experiences – elaborate on the impact these have had. We want to see some level of self-awareness," Mr Evans added.

Similarly, the teacher's reference should contain information that the university may need to take into account when making an offer. For example, the applicant may be a refugee or have suffered a recent bereavement. Or there may have been a problem at the school.

"For example, a mathematics applicant may have been taught by a number of teachers during their A level course because the head of department was on long-term sick leave," Mr Evans said.



## University visits

At Hanham High School in South Gloucestershire, students go on visits to local universities to see the variety of campuses. This year's year 13 students have been to the universities of Gloucestershire, Bath, West of England and Plymouth, and their parents have also attended meetings at the school.

Jo Lukas, the director of post-16, said: "Last term we asked students to compile a wish-list of what they would like and expect from the university experience, and to think about the courses they want to apply for and where they are. They then score these choices against their wish-list to ensure the two match up. We check these to make sure they are not applying for a place which is unsuitable."

Meanwhile, the students from Newstead Wood who are hoping to go to Oxbridge will be taken on visits to those universities during year 12.

## Personal statements

When it comes to personal statements, staff at Newstead Wood support their students from early on in the process. Mr Fitzgerald continued: "We mentor them on their personal statements, which we insist are done well. The early part of year 13 is devoted to Oxbridge candidates and those applying for courses such as medicine and veterinary science, whose applications have to be in earlier."

Back at Hanham, personal statements are written in the autumn term and these will be checked and double-checked before they are submitted. Teachers have a template for references so they are not writing more about one student than another. Finally, applications go through rigorous checking, with headteacher Peggy Farrington doing any fine-tuning.

Hanham student Julia Farrell, 17, hopes to do a course linked to medicine and science after attending access days at Bristol and Gloucestershire universities.

She told *SecEd*: "Teachers have spent time explaining the application process to us which has been really useful. As a result, the most stressful aspect of applying is deciding which course I want to study. But they are helping us to make the right choices. I know that if I have a problem or am unsure of anything that I can go to one of the teachers."

## Parent's view

Julia's mother, Angela, agrees that the university application process can be daunting for parents. She said: "I would advise any parent to go to meetings and evenings arranged by their child's school for the purpose of discussing universities. As parents, we want to help and support our children, but sometimes we just don't know how.

"I was particularly relieved to learn from staff that the tuition fees situation was not quite as bad as it was sometimes painted in the media. I know many other parents were quite alarmed at the whole process but I think we all left the meetings feeling a lot calmer and better informed about everything."

# Money matters

Financial information for students applying to university for 2012

**Tuition fees**

**Funding  
across  
the UK**

**Resources  
& support**



Independent Taskforce on  
**STUDENT FINANCE**  
Information

**SecEd**



# Paying for univ

With so much uncertainty surrounding the financial implications of attending higher education, a new Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information has been set up to help cut through the misinformation

The public debate that preceded and followed the House of Commons' vote over the raising of tuition fees last winter focused heavily on the levels of debt facing graduates.

Indeed, the findings of a study published over the summer by *Push*, a university guide, showed that average debts may reach £53,000 for UK students starting in 2012 – double the figure for 2011.

The perceived lack of understanding among young people and parents about university funding has prompted the establishment of a new body aimed at getting the message across and tackling the myths and misconceptions surrounding the changes to the student finance system in England.

Martin Lewis, who is chief of the website MoneySavingExpert, was appointed as head of the new Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information in June.

He told *SecEd*: "These myths about the new

system of funding university education are both good and bad.

"I am incredibly concerned about the misinformation that is out there, which is potentially disenfranchising an entire generation of young people and discouraging them from university.

"At a time when we have recently experienced riots and looting by young people in many urban areas, there has never been a more important time for us all, including schools and colleges, to get the message across."

Mr Lewis emphasised that he did not support the government's funding changes, but would not be drawn into what he described as a political debate about what the answers to funding university education should be. His involvement is simply, he said, to get the messages across.

The Independent Taskforce comprises a number of members, including UCAS, the National Union of Students (NUS), the

National Association of Student Money Advisers (NASMA), and higher education bodies Universities UK and GuildHE. It is also supported by many others.

From 2012, universities will be allowed to charge tuition fees to new full-time students of up to £9,000 – which is nearly three times the current level. These fees will automatically be paid for first time undergraduates by the Student Loans Company, unless students opt out. Graduates will start to repay the loan when their earnings hit a threshold – currently standing at £21,000.

Mr Lewis, who has participated in many discussions in the media on the issue, said: "For 20 years we've educated our youth into debt when they go to university, but never about debt. For that we should hang our heads in shame.

"With the huge 2012 changes coming, we must ensure students understand the true cost of their education, so they can decide whether it's worth it.

"While I'm not a fan of the changes, we need to get the reality across. People are often scared and confused when they shouldn't be. These changes are now happening, so we must explain the real impact on the pounds in students' pockets.

"This situation will last until at least the end of this Parliament, so this is the system 2012 entrants and beyond will be working with.



# University

There is nothing we can do to change that, but we can ensure that prospective students are clear about the implications.”

Those messages should be discussed and debated in school 6th forms and colleges with teachers targeting those youngsters and parents who are most at risk of opting out of higher education because of a fear of debt.

Parents’ evenings designed specifically to discuss this issue have been particularly effective in dispelling concerns. Some heads report that having understood the facts, parents realise that the financial situation is not as bad as they had feared.

Myths abound among the well-off as well as low-income families. Mr Lewis, who also lobbies for more and better financial education in schools, has had to explain to some parents that they should not pay their children’s fees up front to prevent them from owing the debt on graduation, even if they can afford to.

“For purely financial reasons, this would not currently be money well spent for a majority of people,” he said.

“They need to wait until they know for certain that their children will be in highly paid jobs, such as the law, where their student loan will attract a large amount of interest. A graduate who does not earn the threshold will not have to pay any money back, so

effectively they may be paying off the debt unnecessarily.”

In fact, close analysis of the new system reveals that many young people will never repay the full amount, either because they will not earn a high enough salary, or because the 30-year deadline for repayment will eventually cancel out what they owe.

Mr Lewis added: “Parents who have scrimped and saved to pay their children’s fees would probably be better off giving their children the money to buy a car or putting it towards a deposit on a house. These are the messages that schools should be getting across. You do not have to find the money up-front and so no-one should be put off from going to university.”

David Willetts, universities minister, said of the Taskforce: “This independent group has the expertise and reach to communicate to a huge number of prospective students, families and teachers, as well as to universities. The group will be well resourced by the sector and we will be listening to what

it says. I think all those who are coming together to help ensure the public has the facts.”

Wes Streeting, who has been a campaigner against tuition fees for many years, said there was a need to “dispel any lingering misunderstanding about tuition fees and student finance”.

Meanwhile, Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of Universities UK, added: “We must put to one side the debates about the rights and wrongs of the new fees system and focus on the facts. The politics of tuition fees have hampered the efforts of universities to get the facts out there about student finance.”

### Further information

- Independent Taskforce: [www.studentfinance2012.com](http://www.studentfinance2012.com)
- Martin Lewis’s blog: <http://blog.moneysavingexpert.com/2011/06/17/heading-up-the-new-independent-student-finance-taskforce/>
- Further information on student finance: [www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance](http://www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance)

## Student finance: Key facts

**From 2012 all English institutions will be allowed to charge up to £9,000 in tuition fees. The changes will affect students beginning university next year. Undergraduates who began their courses earlier will remain in the current financing system.**

Students will not have to pay up-front. For first-time undergraduates, once their application has been processed, tuition fees will automatically be paid by a Student Loans Company loan. Repayment will begin in the April after graduation at the earliest.

**The loan is repaid through the income tax system, at a rate of nine per cent of everything earned over £21,000 of pre-tax salary. This threshold will rise over time in line with average earnings. Whether a student chooses a course that costs £6,000 or £9,000, they will repay the same monthly amount.**

The debt is paid off either when it is cleared or after 30 years (from the April after graduation), whichever comes first. Those who never get a job that pays above the threshold will not have to repay. If the graduate dies before the 30-year cut-off point, the debt is wiped.

**Under the current system, there is no ‘real’ cost to borrowing money via student**

**loans as the interest rate is set at the rate of inflation. The new system will involve interest being paid on any outstanding balance, and this will rise with earnings.**

The increase to £21,000 from the current repayment threshold of £15,000 means that graduates will have £540 a year more in their pockets. However, it also means that it will take longer to pay off the loan, compounded by the fact that the original debt is bigger and the interest rate higher.

**Fees will also rise for part-time students to up to £6,750. The current situation states that part-time students will begin to repay from April 2016, rather than at the end of their course, which could result in some needing to start paying back tuition fee loans before they graduate (if earning over £21,000). This is still being decided.**

Student loans are not included on credit reference files, unlike credit cards, loans or mortgages, so they should not affect a credit rating. However, some banks may ask for details about a student loan – for example, before issuing credit cards.

**Those coming from homes with lower incomes or with less traditional university backgrounds are likely to be offered incentives by universities. These include fee waivers, bursaries and scholarships, and students should enquire to find out if they are eligible.**



# Across the UK

With so much talk of changes to tuition fees, there is understandable confusion about what this means in the different home nations of the UK

Changes to student tuition fees in England have encouraged the devolved governments in the rest of the UK to review their own national policies.

As a result, it will be very important for students from all of the home nations to understand the financial implications of higher education and how these may change depending on where they choose to study.

## Scotland

A consultation on proposed fee changes in Scotland, initiated as a direct result of the imposition of higher fees in England, states that the Scottish government would prefer that applicants from other parts of the UK paid the same as Scottish students attending Scottish universities. Currently, about 15 per cent of undergraduates studying in Scotland come from other parts of the UK.

In 2011/12, students from elsewhere in the UK have to pay £1,820 per year (or £2,895 if studying for medicine) to study at Scottish universities. But from 2012, Scottish universities will be able to charge up to £9,000.

The consultation said that “higher education policy across the UK is at its most diverse since devolution and, arguably, ever”, and that Scottish ministers’ first responsibility was “to protect opportunities for Scottish domiciled students to study at Scottish universities”.

It continued: “If we take no action, Scotland will become the cheapest destination for higher education in the UK. This would create an unparalleled level of competition for places at Scottish universities, displacing suitable qualified Scottish domiciled students.

“It would also result in many students making one of the most important decisions they will face based on cost rather than the

academic benefit of a particular course at a particular institution.”

## Wales

In Wales, where funding for universities has been cut by 12 per cent, Leighton Andrews, the minister for education and skills, announced in May that tuition fees would rise from a basic charge of £4,000 up to £9,000 from 2012/13 where universities could demonstrate a commitment to promoting access to higher education.

However, the Welsh Assembly government is to meet the extra cost to Welsh students studying at any UK university. Any charges are to be implemented only with stringent measures to assure quality and to ensure no students are barred from higher education for financial reasons.

It means the Welsh government will allow Welsh students a maximum fee loan of £3,465 as well as a new fee grant to account for the balance of the actual fee charged (up to £9,000) wherever they study in the UK, and for EU students planning to study in Wales only. This means that the subsidy will vary dependent on what the institution charges. For example, if an institution charges £7,000, the fee grant will be £3,535.

Furthermore, Mr Andrews said that where higher fees were charged students will rightly have higher expectations and that he expects to see “improvements in the student experience”. He said the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales would be expected to implement a “robust assessment of the content and quality of institutional fee plans”.

## Northern Ireland

In February this year, the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning recommended that annual student tuition fees should rise to £5,750, from about £3,000, following recommendations by Joanne Stuart of the Institute of Directors. Previously, she had indicated that university fees in Northern Ireland should be frozen.

However, concerns were raised about a potential shortfall of up to £65 million in university funding, which needed to be bridged.

It has been said that the increase should be part of a package which increases the number of students who get financial help and delays the stage at which graduates repay their tuition fee loans.

A consultation on tuition fees is currently taking place in Northern Ireland, however it looks likely that the recommendation will be that non-Northern Ireland students wanting to come to university there will pay the higher rate set by the coalition government which allows universities to charge up to £9,000 a year. This has yet to be confirmed.

## Further information

For the latest information on the situation regarding tuition fees for UK students, visit [www.ucas.com/students/studentfinance](http://www.ucas.com/students/studentfinance)

