



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



**The
Subject Matters**
Post-16 subject
choices

The Subject Matters

The post-16 subject choices that you make can have a major impact on your course and university options. Selective universities such as the University of Cambridge often consider not only the individual subjects, but also the combination of subjects you're studying and how effectively they will prepare you for your chosen course. This leaflet introduces higher education, talks about university life and provides information to help you make informed post-16 subject choices.

Contents

What is higher education?	3
Why go to university?	4
University life	5
How is Cambridge different?	7
Choosing post-16 subjects	8
I know which course I want to study...	9
I want to keep my options open...	11
How to apply	13
Find out more	15



What is higher education?

Higher education is the term used to describe courses of study at universities that are at a higher level than those studied at school or college. These courses lead to qualifications called degrees.



Most people start higher education courses at age 18, after studying A Levels or equivalent qualifications in Years 12 and 13. Some students decide to take a year out first (a gap year) or may 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 395 different places to study.



Please note

The information in this leaflet is written by the University of Cambridge but will be relevant to other selective universities.

This publication offers general guidance in the context of the University of Cambridge and you are encouraged to check university websites, the UCAS website or contact universities directly for more detailed, specific and up-to-date information.

50,000+

courses in the UK

(UCAS, www.ucas.com)

395+

places to study in the UK

(UCAS, www.ucas.com)

2.53

million students

studying at UK higher education providers

(Higher Education Statistics Agency, February 2020)

Why go to university?

To study a particular subject in more depth

You may already enjoy a particular subject at school/college or you may want to branch out into a new area, eg to study surveying because you like geography, or zoology because you enjoy biology.

The career you're interested in may require a degree level qualification

To pursue certain careers you'll need specific qualifications. For example, to become a doctor, dentist, architect, town planner, teacher, lawyer or chartered engineer, you're required to have a degree. Or you may be interested in one of the many high-level jobs that are open to people with any degree – some professions require a degree in a particular subject, but many more jobs don't specify a degree subject.

For the university experience

Being a student at university widens your experience of the world. You meet new people from all over the world and from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures. You'll also have the opportunity to get involved in a huge range of social activities and to live away from home if you want to. All these things make your time at university an all-round experience, as well as giving you a chance to develop a range of skills which are highly valued by employers.



'Going to university is a great way to expand your knowledge, meet new people, and enjoy new experiences.'

(UCAS, www.ucas.com)

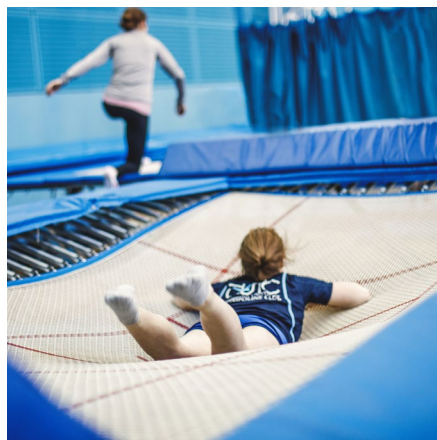


University life

Studying

University study is a much more independent experience than school or college – for a start, you'll have chosen the subject(s) that you most enjoy! You'll have a weekly timetable with a number of lectures (where large numbers of students listen to and make notes on the information given by the lecturer) and classes/seminars (which are smaller groups more similar to the class sizes you're currently used to). Some subjects include practical sessions as well, eg in laboratories or design studios.

However, the biggest difference is that you will be responsible for your own learning and, alongside lectures and classes, be expected to spend a lot of the week in private study time. This will include further reading, research and revision, and (depending on the subject) preparing for group discussions, writing essays, or working through problems.



Social activities

Universities offer lots of social opportunities and activities. Every university 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. There's also a variety of university clubs and societies – ranging from sports clubs, cultural groups, community action groups, student newspapers and radio stations, to drama societies and music groups. Anyone with an interest and enthusiasm can usually find a group to join, or start their own!

Accommodation

Many students, even if they go to a local university, choose not to live at home in order to be more independent. Most universities make this easier by providing accommodation for many of their students, particularly in their first year.

Accommodation could be in a hall of residence or College for large numbers of students, where you'll usually have your own study bedroom and pay rent to the university or College. Alternatively, some students live in small groups in shared houses or flats.

Accommodation at Cambridge

Cambridge guarantee – most undergraduates are guaranteed College-owned accommodation for at least three years.

Shorter contracts – Colleges offer shorter annual accommodation contracts, often between 26 and 39 weeks, so you don't usually pay rent during the vacations.

Not far to travel – College accommodation is close to the city centre and within walking or cycling distance of departments.

Accommodation varies across the Cambridge Colleges and you should check individual College websites for the most up-to-date information:

www.cam.ac.uk/ugcolls.

Support

Starting university is an exciting experience, but being independent, possibly for the first time in your life, doesn't mean that there's no one to turn to for help.

Most students need a bit of time to get used to their new life and routine, and you are encouraged to seek advice, ask questions and raise any concerns at every stage of your university journey. There will be a variety of people you can speak to, such as your personal tutor in your department/ College, the warden in your hall of residence, or a welfare officer.

You can find out more about the support offered at Cambridge on our website:

www.cam.ac.uk/support.



How is Cambridge different?



Teaching

Our teaching staff includes many national and world subject leaders. In addition to lectures and seminars, at Cambridge you'll have supervisions, which are very small teaching sessions, typically consisting of one to three students. Supervisions are a great way of helping you to explore course material in greater depth, investigate new approaches, receive regular feedback and clarify anything you're unsure of.

Departments and Colleges

Cambridge is structured a little bit differently from most other universities in that it's a collegiate University. This means it's made up of faculties and departments in academic subjects and a number of Colleges. There are 31 Colleges at Cambridge, of which 29 accept applications for undergraduate study.

It's the University (through the faculties/ departments) that determines course content; organises lectures, seminars, practicals and projects; sets and marks examinations; and awards degrees.

If you apply to the University, your application is considered by one of the Colleges. Your College is also the place where you live, eat, socialise, and often receive your small group tuition (supervisions). Much more than just a hall of residence, your College can become a key part of your community and offers welfare support as well.



Choosing post-16 subjects

For admission to their degree courses, it's common for universities to require applicants to have qualifications in particular subjects that are relevant to each degree. Therefore, the A Level subject choices you make in Year 11 (or equivalent) can have a significant effect on the universities and course options available to you.



This leaflet provides general information about key subjects that we require applicants to have for admission to degree courses at the University of Cambridge. We hope this will help you make informed decisions so that your A Level choices won't limit your options should you wish to apply to Cambridge in the future.

If you'll be studying qualifications other than A Levels (eg the International Baccalaureate, Scottish Advanced Highers and the Irish Leaving Certificate) the advice that follows is broadly the same. Guidance for a range of qualifications is available on the Undergraduate Study website (www.cam.ac.uk/entrancerequirements) and if you have any queries you should contact us at as early a stage as possible.

What are we looking for?

Everyone who applies to Cambridge is treated and assessed individually. We look for different things in different people for different courses. However, all Admissions Tutors are looking for the students who they believe:

- have the strongest academic ability and potential
- have genuine interest in and are best suited to the course they have applied for
- will benefit from and flourish in the learning environment we offer

I know which course I want to study...

Many Cambridge courses require qualifications in certain subjects and for such subjects to be passed, normally with an A or A* grade at A Level (or equivalent). Applicants may be required to achieve an A* in one or more particular subjects, depending on individual circumstances.

If you've already decided on a course that you'd like to study at university, we recommend that you take a look at the information on courses and entry requirements given on our website (www.cam.ac.uk/courses and www.cam.ac.uk/entrancerequirements) and on websites of other universities you're considering. Do this before you finalise your A Level subject choices to check that they'll be appropriate for your application.



Arts and social sciences

If you'd like to study an arts or social sciences course at university but you're not sure which one, then we'd recommend considering English Literature¹, History, languages and Mathematics. Choosing one or more of these can provide a good foundation for your application.

Other good choices to combine these subjects with include: an additional language, Ancient History, Classical Civilisation, Economics, English Language, Further Mathematics², Geography, Politics, History of Art, Law, Music, Philosophy, Psychology, Religious Studies, sciences (Biology, Chemistry or Physics) or Sociology.

¹ English Language and Literature can be an acceptable alternative at some Cambridge Colleges.

² If your school does not offer Further Mathematics, the Advanced Mathematics Support Programme (www.amspp.org.uk) may be able to help.





'The subjects you study at sixth form or college will influence the degrees which are open to you at university and potentially your future career.'

(Informed Choices,
www.informedchoices.ac.uk)



Sciences

If you think you'd like to study a science course at university but you're not sure which one, then you're advised to take at least two, and ideally three, of Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Further Mathematics, and Physics. Some pairings of these subjects are more natural than others. The most natural pairs are Biology and Chemistry, Chemistry and Physics, and Mathematics and Physics. Another useful combination, particularly for courses where A Level Mathematics is required, is Mathematics, Further Mathematics and Physics.

If you are planning to study Chemical Engineering, biological sciences or medical sciences you should take Chemistry. For physical sciences or Engineering you should take A Level Mathematics and Physics, and ideally Further Mathematics.

Other possible subject choices – for instance Computer Science, Electronics or Psychology – may be useful preparation for some of our science courses. If you are contemplating any of these subjects we would recommend checking entry requirements for the courses you are considering.





I want to keep my options open...

Choosing subjects that genuinely keep your options open is trickier than you might think.



We often encounter students who have taken a mixture of arts and science subjects in the belief that it will keep their options open. While such a subject combination does provide a suitable preparation for many arts and social science courses at the University, it can make you a less competitive applicant for Cambridge's science courses (almost all successful applicants for our science courses have three or even four science or mathematics A Levels).

There are certain A Level subjects that are essential for a number of courses at Cambridge. Therefore, choosing one or more of these can help keep your options open. These subjects include: a language, Chemistry, History, English, Mathematics and Physics. Other subjects that also facilitate course choice at Cambridge include Biology and Further Mathematics.

Should I take three or four A levels?

Typical offers from Cambridge are based on students taking three A Levels (or equivalent) together in Year 13, and most Cambridge applicants are studying three or four A Level subjects in Years 12 and 13.

Applicants taking four subjects won't normally be at an advantage compared with those taking three, as we'd rather applicants develop greater knowledge of the subjects most relevant to their chosen course than accumulate additional A Levels. However, competitive applicants for science subjects and Economics often have Further Mathematics as a fourth subject.

In all cases, your individual circumstances will be taken into account during the admissions process.

We aim to offer admission to students of the highest intellectual potential, irrespective of social, racial, religious and financial considerations.

(University of Cambridge Admissions Policy, www.cam.ac.uk/admissionspolicy)

Other A Level Subjects

There are many other A Level subjects that we haven't mentioned at all in this leaflet. The fact that we haven't mentioned them doesn't mean that we think they're not individually valuable. Subjects such as Drama and Theatre and Art and Design can be appropriate preparation for certain courses such as English or Architecture. However, as Cambridge does not typically offer vocational subjects, A Levels such as Business, Photography or Media Studies may not be appropriate. If you are considering a Vocational Level 3 course as one of your three choices, we would advise you to check the entry requirements for your chosen course, as they are not usually accepted. If you wish to take any of these subjects and you want to apply to Cambridge or the most competitive Russell Group universities, we'd advise you to take them alongside three academic A Levels, rather than as one of three.

Critical Thinking and Key Skills aren't considered suitable options as one of your three A Level choices for any course at Cambridge. We welcome candidates with the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), as it helps develop independent study and research skills which are valuable for higher education. However this wouldn't normally form part of a conditional offer.



A common misconception is that you have to go into a job directly related to the degree subject that you studied. In fact, for the majority of vacancies we advertise each year, the employers would welcome applications from any discipline.

(Cambridge Careers Guide, 2021)



How to apply



How do I choose a course at university?

A good place to start is to think about the subject(s) you're interested in personally – this might be one of your school/college subjects or something you do in your spare time.

A university degree is about focusing on one or two particular subjects for several years, so it's important to choose something you enjoy!

Many universities produce printed or online prospectuses which give details of their degree courses, entrance requirements and other important information such as sports and social facilities and what the town/city is like.

Reading websites and prospectuses, and visiting universities and colleges on open days will help you to work out what you'd like to study and where. You'll also be able to find out what grades you'll need to get into the university of your choice. Your school or college, or the UCAS website (www.ucas.com), can also offer further help and guidance.



When can I choose?

It's never too early to start thinking about higher education. You'll usually have the chance to speak to teachers and careers advisers in Years 10 or 11 to discuss your options when you leave school or college, including the possibility of going to university. You may find it helpful to look at a few prospectuses or university websites in Year 11, but bear in mind that courses and entry requirements do change from year to year. If you look at a prospectus or university website several years in advance, the details may well have changed by the time you come to apply, so do check again before you apply.

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

Once you're in Year 12, you'll need to do some research into courses and universities by consulting websites and prospectuses, looking at higher education directories and guides, and going to careers fairs or university open days. Most of the information you need can be found on university websites, but many schools and colleges will have copies of prospectuses in their libraries, and some universities offer the opportunity to order your own printed prospectus.

When and how can I apply?

Students usually apply during the first or second term of Year 13, in the year before they want to start their course. In the UK, students apply to universities through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). You'll complete one application, on which you can choose up to five institutions to apply to. You should be able to get help and support from your school or college when you apply, and university admissions teams can be a great source of advice.

What else do universities look for?

Many universities will be interested in extra-curricular activities, including your hobbies and interests, work experience, voluntary work and any positions of responsibility that you may have held either in school/college or elsewhere. At Cambridge, our admissions decisions are based on academic criteria (ability and potential), so activities that are of no relevance to your course will not increase your chances of receiving an offer. We do look for evidence of wider engagement within your area of academic interest – we call these activities 'super-curricular'. You can find more details on our website; www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/super-curricular-activities.

*The deadline for applying to either
Cambridge or Oxford is*

15 October¹

¹Other application deadlines may apply for international and mature applicants and for our Foundation Year course. Please note, you can't apply to both the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford in the same year.





Find out more



Your teachers and careers advisers will be able to give you help and advice about applying to university. In addition, all universities arrange activities and events – such as masterclasses, campus tours and summer schools – to help students find out more about higher education.

When you're in Year 12, you may have the opportunity to attend a higher education convention in your region where you'll be able to talk to representatives from a large number of universities, as well as pick up copies of prospectuses. Someone from a university may also visit your school or college to give a talk.

If you want to visit in person to find out more, you'll find that most universities and colleges organise open days to allow you to do just that.

Visit the links below for more information about higher education:

Undergraduate Study website:



www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk

On our Undergraduate Study website you'll find information about the courses that we offer, as well as more general information about what it's like to study at Cambridge and the application process. Each course page has information about the topics you'll cover, teaching, and assessment, so it's a great place to look to start considering if a course here would suit you. You'll also find information about events for Year 12 (or equivalent) students, such as Subject Masterclasses and Cambridge Open Days.

Informed Choices website:



www.informedchoices.ac.uk

Informed Choices is aimed at pupils aged 14 and upwards who are considering university and want information to help them choose the right subjects to study at sixth form or college. The guidance is written by admissions directors from the 24 Russell Group universities and provides information on why subject choice matters.

HE+ website:



www.myheplus.com

Once you have chosen the university course you would like to study, visit the HE Plus website. This website has a wide range of subject resources to help you get started with 'super-curricular' work. Super-curricular activities include anything you do beyond your school/college work which develops your subject interest, so it's a great way to show admissions staff which parts of your subject you find most interesting and why you want to study a specific course.



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

For more information contact the
Cambridge Admissions Office:

Cambridge Admissions Office

University of Cambridge
Student Services Centre
New Museums Site
Cambridge CB2 3PT

✉ admissions@cam.ac.uk

🌐 www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk



Details are correct at the time of publication (February 2022) but should be checked against the Undergraduate Study website and other university websites for the most up-to-date information.

© University of Cambridge, 2022.