

Parents' guide to higher education – 2012 entry



Queen Mary
University of London



Why choose Queen Mary, University of London?

- **the University of London:** Queen Mary is the third largest University of London college, with over 15,000 students, and all Queen Mary graduates gain a University of London degree – recognised world-wide as a guarantee of quality
- **excellent career prospects:** our London location between the City and Docklands gives our students a big advantage in the job market, and many of our graduates go into the financial sector, as well as management training schemes. Many blue-chip companies advertise their training places with us and visit the College to recruit. According to the Sunday Times league table, Queen Mary's graduates have the eighth-highest average starting salaries in the UK. We can also boast lower than average graduate unemployment
- **high-quality research:** the 2008 Government review of UK universities' research (the RAE) confirmed that Queen Mary is a leading research university, ranked 11th in the UK for the quality of our research work (The Guardian newspaper table). This means that our students are taught by staff who are active in research, often at the cutting edge of the subject and doing work of international importance. Their enthusiasm and knowledge is guaranteed to rub off and their research interests often feed directly into their teaching, which is right up to date.
- **teaching quality:** at Queen Mary we take teaching very seriously. We use small group teaching and tutorials in many subject areas, and students' feedback is encouraged and acted upon. We also have an excellent modular scheme which allows students considerable flexibility to choose topics which interest them
- **accommodation:** we can provide College accommodation to most first year students who live too far away to commute, and the new Westfield Student Village at the Mile End Campus has added 1,000 rooms to the existing on-campus accommodation, giving a total of around 2,000
- **campus lifestyle:** we are one of very few city-based campus universities, so students mix with people from other departments and never have to walk far
- **friendly, community atmosphere:** everyone who visits Queen Mary is struck by our friendliness. Relations between staff and students are excellent, and the social life of the College is lively. The Students' Union supports a vast range of clubs and societies. Never underestimate the value of a healthy social life at university: employers always look for people who've had a life outside their studies, as they have well-developed time-management and 'people' skills

Support for students at Queen Mary

Queen Mary is known for its caring, friendly environment, and your son or daughter will be part of a real community. Most students have a completely trouble-free time at university, but just in case problems do arise, there is always someone here to help:

- **personal tutor:** all students are allocated a member of the academic staff as their personal tutor – someone they can go to with study issues such as module choice or any problems, whether they haven't understood a lecture or cannot meet a work deadline
- **advice service:** the College's welfare advisers can help with financial problems (including how to budget), housing issues, and other practical difficulties
- **counselling:** a confidential service to support students with stress-related and emotional problems, however small
- **the College Health Centre:** available to all students living locally, providing an on-campus

GP and nurse service on weekdays (and an off-campus one at weekends). Make sure your child registers at the start of term, rather than leaving it until they actually need the service!

- **Queen Mary's Students' Union (QMSU):** Supports students generally and provides advice on a huge range of issues, from transport to health
- **College Careers Service:** part of the Careers Group, the largest careers service in the UK. Professional careers advisers are on hand to help with drafting CVs, interview preparation, application forms and so on, plus guidance for those unclear about their career plans. Various prestigious companies give presentations to students, and an annual careers fair is held on campus, plus careers 'speed-meets' and other events. The Service also runs a JobShop for part-time and vacation work
- **faith at Queen Mary:** as a truly multicultural university, we promote religious understanding and aim to meet the needs of students from

different religious backgrounds. St Benet's is the College christian and ecumenical chaplaincy, and the Multi-Faith Centre has prayer rooms for all faiths (including washing facilities). There are also churches, synagogues, mosques and a buddhist prayer centre near the Campus

- **help with study skills:** some students find the change from school to university-level study challenging. This is not necessarily because it is more difficult, but because it often involves new ways of working. All students can take advantage of the Academic Study Programme covering aspects such as: organisation and time-management; research and notetaking; presentations; academic writing; and revision and exam techniques
- **Disability and Dyslexia service:** can advise students with disabilities, dyslexia or long-term medical conditions on a range of issues, from exam and study arrangements to special equipment and assistance. Enquiries from prospective students are welcome: email dds@qmul.ac.uk

Student finance from 2012

Under the new arrangements it will be study now and pay later for your son or daughter – with repayments linked to graduate earnings, not loan amount



Full details of the arrangements for 2012 entry will be released by the Government and universities later in 2011/12. Keep up to date by visiting:
www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance or
www.bis.gov.uk

Details of Queen Mary's tuition fees, plus other general finance information, are available at:
www.qmul.ac.uk/undergraduate/financialsupport

Students can apply on-line for all forms of Government student finance from the spring of the year they go to university. Schools and colleges generally have details and will advise. An assessment of household income will determine entitlement to financial support such as the Maintenance Grant.

Students living in England apply for financial support through www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance; for those living in Wales, www.studentfinancewales.co.uk; for Scottish applicants, www.student-support-saas.gov.uk; and for those in Northern Ireland, www.studentfinancenir.co.uk

Please note that the arrangements described here apply to students living in England, choosing to study at an English university. Arrangements for students domiciled in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and other EU countries, and for students living in England but studying in these countries, differ.

As you are probably aware, the Government is changing the arrangements for tuition fees and student finance from 2012 entry. Parents, understandably, worry about the cost of university. Fortunately, there is no requirement for students to pay tuition fees up-front or while studying. At time of writing (February 2011) the full details were not known but here are the key points:

Tuition Fees

From 2012, universities will be able to charge £6,000 per year in tuition fees; some will be allowed to charge up to £9,000, as long as they meet strict criteria to ensure all students can access their courses, regardless of their family income. Individual universities will publicise their fees on their websites in good time for students to make informed decisions about their UCAS course choices.

Tuition Fee Loans

As under the current system, students will be able to pay their tuition fees after graduation by taking out a Tuition Fee Loan from Student Finance England, who pay the fees direct to the university. These loans are available to all, irrespective of household income. Responsibility for paying fees rests with the student, not with parents.

Maintenance Loan

This is available to all eligible full-time students and is the main source of cash for living expenses, again from Student Finance England. The amount a student can borrow is limited. Figures for 2012 entry were not available at time of writing.

Repaying the Loans

Tuition Fee Loans and Maintenance Loans are combined and repayments will start the April after your son or daughter graduates – but only if s/he is earning £21,000 or more per year. Repayments are taken out through the tax system so the whole process is very simple: there's no need to set up direct debits.

The most important point is that repayments are related to income, not the actual amount of debt: graduates will pay nine per cent of their income above £21,000. As an example, someone earning £21,500 – currently the salary of a newly-qualified teacher – would initially make repayments of just £4 per month. The monthly repayment would increase to £23 for someone earning £24,000

per year; £30 on a salary of £25,000; £45 on £27,000; and £68 on £30,000. If the graduate were to stop earning over £21,000 the repayments would stop. Any debt outstanding after 30 years will be written-off.

The rate of interest charged will vary. For graduates earning below £21,000, interest will be applied at the rate of inflation. Graduates earning between £21,000 and £41,000 will be charged interest on a sliding scale up to a maximum of inflation plus 3 per cent. It is worth noting that parents are not responsible for repaying their child's Student Loan debt.

Maintenance Grant

Students from families with incomes of up to £25,000 will be entitled to a non-repayable (the magic words) maintenance grant of up to £3,250 and those from families with incomes up to £42,000 will be entitled to a partial grant. An assessment of the family income will be made well before your son or daughter goes to university so that you all know in advance what s/he will be entitled to.

National Scholarship Programme

Students from lower income families will be able to benefit from a new £150m National Scholarship Programme. At time of writing, the details were yet to be finalised, but the crucial point is that scholarships do not have to be repaid.

As well as this support, other sources of income could also be very useful:

Student bank accounts

These usually include an interest-free overdraft facility. Encourage your son or daughter to do some homework and choose the best overall deal, not just the best freebie.

Earnings from part-time and vacation work

Many students work part-time and in the holidays, but they should always check with their academic department regarding the maximum number of hours a week they should work.

Sponsorships

Some employers actually pay students to go to university, so sponsorships are well worth applying for. Careers teachers can advise on these.

The benefits of higher education

Your son or daughter is likely to graduate with debts – so is university really worth it?



Given that your son or daughter will spend at least three years on a degree, funded through Student Loans and possibly also the Bank of Mum and Dad – actually, why should s/he bother with university? The benefits of university level study are myriad and not all of them are related to job prospects and earnings potential – although, in the long run they all feed into your child's employability.

1. Employability

In recent decades demand for graduates has grown with supply: many small firms which twenty years ago would not have done so, now recruit from universities. They are prepared to pay more for graduates' skills. It is impossible to know what the job market will be like in several years' time, but recent history tells us that a degree is usually a sound investment: however challenging the current recession is for today's graduates, it is often more difficult for young people without a degree. The keys are to achieve a good class of degree and to develop the skills described below. Plus, work experience is virtually essential, including voluntary work, internships, sandwich years and even that dull part-time job.

2. Skills, skills, skills

Over half of graduate jobs do not specify a degree subject; the rest are in sectors where specific knowledge is required (technology, medicine, science, etc.). For many jobs in fields as diverse as management consultancy, finance, retail management and so on, employers recruit graduates in all sorts of disciplines. Why is this? It's down to transferable skills: abilities which all good graduates develop. What are these and how are they developed? Firstly, university study is all about developing analytical and critical thinking skills: the ability to sift information, draw conclusions and present a logical argument. The ability, in fact, to think for oneself. Any university student should develop this skill, whether they are applying it to mathematical or engineering problems, philosophical questions, a business plan for a proposed new company, or a design brief. Then there are the sort of practical skills that will be highly valued in the workplace: organisational ability (students have to plan their workload to meet deadlines); presentation skills, developed through leading seminars, presenting projects, and so on; writing ability (essays, projects, lab reports, etc.); numeracy – this is in particular demand,

which is why graduates in subjects like maths, physics, engineering, economics and so on tend to do well in the job market and have high earnings potential; and team working, developed through group work, which is a feature of many degrees. Linguists are sought-after and most universities offer all students the chance to learn a language. Finally, and importantly, interpersonal skills: developed through both group work and social life.

3. Personal development

A healthy social life is no doubt high on your son or daughter's agenda. It might be slightly lower down yours, but this is how students hone their social skills: the 'soft' transferable skills which today's employers so value. This does not mean that the shy introvert has to suddenly become a raging extravert during freshers' week – it is more a chance for all students to develop their confidence around new people. Your son or daughter will join the students' union, the source of the ultimate social life. As well as running events, the union will support a huge range of clubs and societies, from sports to general interest. If no society exists for your child's interest it is usually easy to start one (and this looks very impressive on a CV). It is also possible to get involved with the running of the union, either by standing for election as a sabbatical officer or helping in the entertainments, or 'ents' office, booking bands, DJs and so on. Or by contributing to the student newspaper, magazine, radio or even TV station: all excellent experience for the world of work, especially a media career. There will also be lots of volunteering opportunities, either through the students' union or the university itself, perhaps working in a local school, or helping at a care home – again, great experience for the real world. All these activities enhance a CV. Remember: a CV with no extra-curricular activities is not that attractive to employers.

4. Love of the subject

The chance for your son or daughter to get deeply involved with a subject s/he finds fascinating might sound like an extravagant luxury but confers great benefits. Apart from being enjoyable for its own sake, it also means that the student is more likely to throw themselves into their studies and do well: the ultimate objective of the dedicated student is to achieve a 2:1 or first class degree, which opens doors with graduate employers.

The UCAS application system

How does it work? What are universities looking for? And how can you support your child through the UCAS application maze?

The UCAS application

Applications for higher education courses are made through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), but UCAS are not involved with the actual selection process. Students can apply for up to five courses, although potential doctors, dentists and vets are limited to four course choices (the final one can be for another subject or just left blank). Individual universities don't see the student's other choices. The actual closing date for applications is January 15th (October 15th for Oxford and Cambridge, plus medical, dental and vet science courses). However, an earlier application is advisable for popular courses and universities; most schools and colleges set their own, much earlier, internal deadlines, so check this and nag if necessary.

All applications are made on-line through UCAS Apply; a charge of £21 is payable. The school or college will add a reference and submit the application to UCAS, where it will be processed, and forwarded to each university applied to. Responses could include offers of a place, interviews, or rejections. The following April/May UCAS will confirm all offers and students are asked to choose two: a first, or firm, choice and an insurance choice. Come results day, if the applicant has the grades for the first choice, they go there; if not, they are off to their second. If they have missed completely they will enter Clearing.

The admissions tutor

Typically, most courses have an admissions tutor who reads all the UCAS forms. They are busy people, writing and giving lectures, researching their next book, marking essays, etc., and your child should always assume that their form is not the only one on his/her desk. It's also quite possible that your child will not be interviewed (prospectuses normally give the policy on this) – so the form is doubly important, as a second chance to impress in person may not be forthcoming.

What makes a good application?

All universities and departments have differing entry requirements: applicants must make sure they meet them. On the academic side, these might include GCSE grades, predicted grades or points at A2 or a particular IB score, plus, sometimes, a specific combination of subjects. There are also a number of admissions tests, notably those for Oxbridge, medicine and dentistry (UKCAT and BMAT)

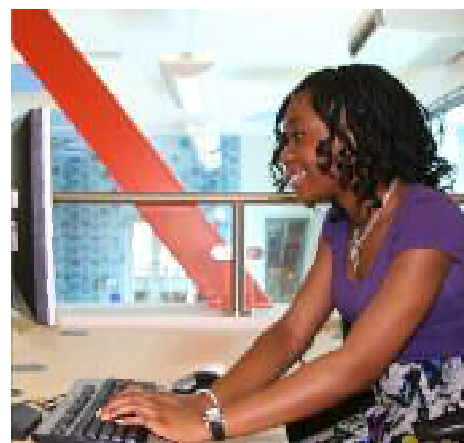
and law (LNAT). Students should practise these under timed conditions. Non-academic factors can include relevant experience, personal qualities (such as creativity, for art/design, or empathy for medicine) or even specific skills (like manual dexterity for dentistry). Prospectuses provide details. The crucial point is that students should only apply for courses for which they meet the entry requirements, and are predicted the necessary grades. Remember that although the UCAS Tariff ascribes points to various other qualifications (such as music certificates), universities might not include these points in their offers. Beyond the academic side, universities like to see a well-rounded individual who is motivated to go to university and actually study, and who has thoroughly researched his/her course choice.

The personal statement

This is the difficult bit, as applicants must market themselves; many attempts are often needed. Universities want to know why they have applied for that course; if it is a new subject, do they know what it is? Is there evidence that the student enjoys studying, has developed independent study skills (for example through taking the EPQ), can manage their time effectively, and will be mature enough to cope with the freedom of university life? Part-time jobs, voluntary work, involvement with clubs, sports and other extra-curricular activities all impress. Any major achievements indicate staying-power and time-management skills, whether it's music, sport, drama. Interests are useful, but a long list of unusual hobbies isn't necessary. 'Normal' hobbies such as reading, cinema, theatre, sport, and so on are fine (not shopping or watching TV, note). It is important to get the balance right between the academic and non-academic aspects: half the space devoted to one hobby is too much.

How can I help?

Take an interest in the application and encourage your child to take it seriously. Find out what support the school or college gives and back it up. Read the personal statement through and point out any underselling (or actual lies: interview humiliation could await). Imagine you'd read 26 other forms: would this one hold your interest? Tell him or her (tactfully) if s/he sounds really dull. Check that they have used words they know the meaning of, plus spelling, grammar and so on, too.



Choosing the right course and university

Making sure your son or daughter chooses wisely presents challenges – but thorough research should ensure a successful university career



Course

The subject should come first, and with over 50,000 courses available in the UK, your child should be able to find an ideal match: a degree he or she will enjoy and do well at. This is important since getting a good class of degree is vital in today's job market.

University courses can be split into three main categories: professional (such as medicine and engineering); broadly or specifically vocational (business management and journalism); and academic (like the subjects your son or daughter may have studied at school: history, French, physics, etc.). Sometimes it is possible to work back from a career plan – although don't assume that a specific degree is always necessary: over half of graduate jobs are open to all graduates.

Once the subject (or subjects: all sorts of combinations are available) has been decided, factors to take into account when selecting actual courses include: entry requirements; methods of teaching and assessment; career prospects; subject-specific facilities (labs, IT equipment, etc.); and course content, including optional modules. The latter is particularly important and can vary considerably between universities despite similar degree titles. Your son or daughter should not leave this to chance!

Location: campus or town?

City-centre university: handy for shops, nightlife and so on? OR campus life, where everything, from the students' union to halls, library and lecture theatres, is on one site? Equip your child with a map of the UK before s/he makes any decisions; distance and travel costs from home to university as well as the physical environment are important.

Size: large v small

HE institutions range from 2,000 to 30,000 students. A small university can be more manageable but might have fewer facilities and non-academic activities. A larger university will have more going on but may be intimidating to the shyer student.

Accommodation

How much is it? Is it guaranteed in the first year? Is it good quality? Are there ensuite facilities? Is it catered or self-catering? What help is there for students looking for private sector accommodation after the first year?

Facilities

All universities have the basics like libraries, sports halls, computer suites and so on, but there can be differences in the quality and range of facilities on offer.

Clubs and societies

If your son or daughter has a major interest in a sport, say, sailing, then he or she will probably want to select a university where they can pursue this. Football or netball? Pitches and courts will be needed. Or maybe he or she has always wanted to try amateur dramatics or writing for a student newspaper...will this be possible? Then there are the hobbies – film, music, chess, and so on. Is there a film society, choir or chess club? This aspect is important as your son or daughter will spend several years at university and they need to be happy.

How to choose? Your son or daughter should get advice from his or her teachers and careers adviser, look into computer tests such as UKCourseFinder, attend events such as university open days, taster courses and higher education conventions, and research university websites. What else is useful?

League tables, NSS and Unistats

For many confused students (and parents) newspaper league tables (such as the Times' and the Guardian's) hold the key to finding a 'good' university. They are useful, but avoid looking at them cold. Tables are produced in different ways, with weighting assigned to certain factors, and can be based on universities as a whole or on individual subjects. For example, a university may rank 30th out of 100 overall, but have departments in the subject's top ten. For the tables to be really helpful you need to help your child work out his or her priorities. League tables rate universities on a range of criteria which typically includes: research quality; teaching quality; average UCAS Tariff points; staff:student ratios; accommodation; drop-out rates; and graduate employment prospects.

Last but very definitely not least, the annual National Student Survey (NSS) asks final year students their views on various aspects of their courses, including how they rate the whole experience overall. The results, alongside lots of other essential information such as graduate employment records, are available at www.unistats.com.

Questions? Call or email the Education Liaison Office for answers!

tel: 020 7882 3064
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