

UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS: FAQs

The majority of Pate's students apply to study in the UK and this means applying through **UCAS**. You may already know a lot about UCAS or have realised that there is a lot of useful information on the UCAS website but I have put together a few FAQs:

1. **How does UCAS work?** Before application the Sixth Form team give students lots of advice and help researching suitable courses and encourage them to use Unifrog www.unifrog.org for research. Application through UCAS in Year 13 is online wwwucas.com
2. **What about timing?** Students log on and fill in personal details in June/July of Year 12 and start drafting a personal statement. We help with personal statement writing and these are usually completed over the summer or early in September of Year 13.
3. **Does the personal statement matter?** The statement varies in importance depending on the course applied for but it is always worth doing a good job with it. A statement should say why you want to apply for the subject or course you are applying for and should give examples, evidence and reflection on your wider reading and interests. Spelling and grammar are important but students should not feel that they have to use very complicated vocabulary – it is a 'personal' statement so should sound like them (not a thesaurus!)
4. **How long is a personal statement?** 4000 characters including spaces. Any longer and it will be cut off.
5. **Can I apply for more than one subject or course on one UCAS form?** As you only get one Personal Statement this is difficult. You can ask to submit an alternative personal statement directly to the university but the university will still see the other statement.
6. **Who writes the reference?** At Pate's each subject teacher writes comments about a student and then a member of the reference-writing team reads all these and writes a reference. The reference outlines the Pate's context and mentions if someone joined in 6th form, has carried out work experience or been involved with school committees, house activities, etc. It will be as supportive as possible and will give examples of ways students have proved that they are suitable for further study. It will also include a brief outline of any extra challenges a student has had to face. Unlike most schools we believe that it is important for students to know what is being written so we ask students to proofread their reference for factual or typographical errors. They cannot question judgements made and cannot take the reference away.
7. **How many university choices on a UCAS form?** Minimum of one choice, maximum of five. Most people opt for five. If you apply for Medicine, Dentistry or Vet Medicine you can only select four MDV choices and your 5th choice should be another subject.
8. **What do teachers mean by 'including a range of universities'?** Unifrog is especially useful for this as it generates a 3 column list of 'aspirational', 'solid' and 'safe' university choices. We advise a mix to ensure the maximum number of offers.
9. **Can I rank universities in order of preference?** No, this is not possible. The completed UCAS form is sent to each of your choices without the other university choices knowing where else you have applied.

10. **What about Firm and Insurance choices?** When you have received decisions from all your university choices you then decide which to keep as a firm and insurance choice and decline the others – this usually happens in April or May of Year 13. By definition an ‘insurance’ choice should (if possible) have a lower grade requirement than a firm choice.
11. **How long will I have to wait for offers?** This varies enormously depending on the university and the course. Some make offers very quickly. Courses where an interview is required will take much longer for a decision to be made – applicants for Medicine often have to wait until April/May for decisions.
12. **What are Unconditional Offers?** Unconditional Offers can be made to students who have already taken their A levels and achieved the grades required for a course, or some universities for some courses give Unconditional Offers to applicants who present a very strong application pre-A level results. These are usually only Unconditional if a candidate chooses that offer as their Firm choice although some make completely Unconditional offers.
13. **Will I be offered an interview?** Vocational courses and Oxford and Cambridge invite selected applicants for interview. Some other courses invite candidates for interview – these vary, some are selection interviews and some are visit days. At Pate’s we offer help to anyone invited for a selection interview.
14. **Degree Apprenticeships:** Universities plus a commercial partner may offer a degree apprenticeship. Students can work, earn and study and, if they do well, will be guaranteed a job at the end of their degree. Examples are offered by Dyson, PWC and Vodaphone. Students will find many more examples on Unifrog.
15. **Can I apply to Oxford and Cambridge?** No, one or the other, not both.
16. **What is different about an Oxford or Cambridge application?** It must be completed earlier so that it can be submitted to UCAS before the 15 October deadline. At Pate’s we set an internal deadline in early September of Year 13 for printed copies of forms to be handed in so that we have plenty of time to write the reference. Changes to university choices or tweaks to the statement can be made up until the point when the form is sent to UCAS.
17. **Pre-Interview Admissions Testing:** Both Oxford and Cambridge require a number of subject specific admissions tests. There will be preparation sessions for these in the Autumn term and students will register for these at school and the tests will be taken at school. Further information: <http://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/>
18. **What is STEP?** The Sixth Term Maths Paper is taken by students applying to study Maths, or sometimes Engineering, at only a few institutions. The Pate’s Maths department will have more information and run preparation sessions.
19. **Does it matter which Oxford or Cambridge College I choose?** Both Oxford and Cambridge have systems in place so that if too many people apply to any one college they will be redistributed and considered by another college. The system means that there is an equal chance of getting a place at the university regardless of college choice. Applicants should choose somewhere that offers their subject and that they like, or submit an Open Application.

20. **What do universities think about gap years?** Most are really positive and say that students who have taken a gap year tend to be more mature and focused. If you are planning a gap year you have 2 chances to apply. You can apply for a deferred place while at school – if you get the place you want you can then go on your gap year knowing that you have a place sorted – or, if you do not get the place you want, you have the chance to reapply during your gap year.
21. **If I don't get the place I want or I change my mind or I get better than expected results, can I reapply?** Yes, we will be happy to support you if you decide to reapply.
22. **When we go to universities for open days they talk about the REF and the TEF, what are these?** The REF is the Research Excellence Framework, a set of criteria by which a university is measured for the quality of research that takes place there. This is unlikely to directly impact an undergraduate. The TEF is the Teaching Excellence Framework and is a measure of the quality of teaching at that particular institution. Both of these measures have been introduced recently to allow students some comparative data. How useful they are as objective measures of success is debatable.
23. **So what about League Tables?** Universities are ranked by different criteria in different league tables so my advice would be not to place too much store by League Tables. If you do use them use the ones for your subject, not the overall ranking. You may be surprised at the differences that are thrown up.
24. **What does LEO stand for?** Employability and 'Value for Money' are much debated in relation to university courses. Longitudinal Education Outcomes is a dataset, to track graduates into the workplace, using information from different government departments. The theory is that students will have a way of comparing what graduates from any particular course are doing/earning after graduating. Unfortunately this is a crude measure and means that those in lower paid (but essential) jobs (such as Nursing) or working in the Voluntary sector will bring the overall figures down and can therefore be seen (mistakenly) as lowering the 'value' of that course. LEO is also proving difficult for universities to assess as students often move from one job to another without informing their alma mater!
25. **Finance...Should we take a loan? How does Student Finance work?** Unlike many other countries, Student Loans mean that University Tuition is free at the point of use and payment only starts after graduation and is 9% of any earnings over the threshold of £25,000 (it could be regarded as an extra tax). The tuition loan is paid directly to the university. Maintenance loans to help with living costs are means-tested on household income and are often not sufficient to cover costs so parents often find that it is better to help the student with living costs than try to pay off the tuition loan. Student loans are wiped after 30 years regardless of how much has been paid back. Deciding about Student Finance is a personal decision but the majority of Pate's families opt to take a loan. If you choose not to you will have to prove to a university that you have sufficient funds available to pay.
26. **Do student loans affect credit rating?** When being assessed for a mortgage (for example) the monthly student loan payment would be assessed as one of the out-goings, **not** as an outstanding debt or bad credit. I thoroughly recommend Martin Lewis' explanation of Student Finance – see YouTube or moneysavingexpert.com
27. **Check distances and fares:** It sounds so obvious but students sometimes forget to look at a map and check how they would travel to and from their chosen university (And how much it might cost!)

Please let me know if you have any further questions! Thank you.

