

How to choose a university?

If you've decided you want to go to university, you will likely ask yourself how to decide which one to go to. Depending on where you currently live there may only be a few universities in your country, or perhaps there are hundreds. If you'd rather not move too far away, you will limit yourself to fewer options: this might actually help you with your decision! However, if you are willing to uproot yourself, you'll find many more options.

To help you decide on a university, consider the different topics outlined below.

Subject/degree

Do you know what you want to study? Because most universities do not offer all imaginable subjects/degrees, selecting one (or a few) will help you hone in on suitable institutions. Once you have selected a degree, consider whether you meet the entry requirements. You will likely have focused on a handful of subjects for your final exams: this makes you suitable for many degrees but also excludes you from others. For instance, if you haven't done sciences for your final exams, you will likely not be eligible to start a science degree at a university.

Many students think very carefully about the subjects they select for their final years of secondary school and will thus have the right preparation for university degrees they are interested in. Some might find they miss out on only a small subject/module: this can sometimes be resolved by studying that material over the summer. If you find that you made a poor choice in secondary-school subjects and will not be accepted to the course you set your mind to, consider taking a year out to catch up on those missing subjects. You will likely be able to study these at a special (evening) school, so you may only need a year to make sure you meet the entry requirements of your desired degree.

Research university vs. polytechnic

Do you want to go to an academic/research university or a polytechnic? There may be substantial differences between studying a certain subject at an academic university and studying it at a polytechnic (often called a 'university of applied something'). For certain types of jobs you will have to have studied at a research university. However, for other jobs you may be suitable with a degree from either a polytechnic or a university. If you already know what job you would like in the future, make sure to read details of the required training/diplomas to help you with your decision.

Location

You will likely want to live on campus or at least live in the city where you study. You will thus not only study in the city of your university, but you will live there too. Depending on how many weeks of teaching you have per year, this means you may live in this city for the entire duration of your degree (bar a few weeks over the holidays).

People are different: some people will be happy wherever they are, whereas others strongly prefer a specific city or region. If you belong to the latter category, it might be smart to do some research on the locations of the universities you fancy going to. You may spend 3+ years in this city, and if you don't think you'll enjoy living there, you may have a bad time (even if your course is great).

Rankings

What is the university's ranking? Rankings aren't the be-all and end-all of a university, but they might help you to decide between a few universities that otherwise seem very similar to you. A well-known university on your CV could help to get selected over similar candidates that have attended less prestigious universities. However, do not let rankings be the main factor. Yes, you do want to go to a 'good' university, but a university at position 100 in the world is not a bad one at all.

Remember that the top-ranking universities will receive many more applicants than the lower-ranked ones, so you will have to compete with more people to get accepted to such prestigious institutions. You may thus want to select a few universities to apply to in order to increase your chances of ending up with at least one offer.

Finances

Let's talk money. Can you afford to study anywhere, or are you restricted by a budget or dependent on loans? Tuition fees vary considerably between countries. Moreover, tuition fees differ for national and international students, so do some thorough research on the costs associated with studying at the university you consider applying to. If you are considering a student loan, make sure you are eligible.

Remember that tuition is just one of your expenses. You will also need to pay for your accommodation, books, food, clothes, and you may need to pay for healthcare insurance and commuting. In an ideal world you would also be able to afford some entertainment, such as a sports club, going to the cinema, a restaurant, or do some travelling. Also consider costs of visiting your family and whether you can afford to do this as often as you would like.

Costs of living vary tremendously, both between countries and within countries. Ensure you have a complete and accurate understanding of your total costs per year so that you can make an informed decision. Nothing is worse than not doing your homework and finding out that you actually cannot afford your own bedroom, transport, or food once you've already moved. Note that in many countries people do not share a bedroom (except if they are a romantic couple). You thus need to take into account the costs for a private single bedroom with regards to housing expenses.

Not sure university is the right choice for you? Read *[our article on how to decide whether university is for you]*.