

Researching and Selecting Degree Programs in the UK*

Personal Contacts: Talk to faculty, research supervisors, and others who know you, your work, and your academic interests.

- *Ask professors in your field* what they know about top programs and leading scholars in Britain. Ask if they can refer you to someone in their professional network who can help you in your exploration of degree courses.
- *Do a literature search on your topic* to find the specialists in Britain, then research the courses of study/degrees offered at a specialist's university. See official databases, and ratings and rankings sections below.
- *Contact a British scholar directly* after thorough investigation, describe your background and proposed project for graduate study/research, and further explore whether the program or research center is a good match for your interests.

Official Databases allow you to search programs by subject, key words, institution, and/or type of degree course.

- *Prospects guide for graduates:* <http://www.prospects.ac.uk> Click on the "Postgraduate Study" tab, and then select "search postgraduate courses."
- *Hobson's postgrad:* <http://www.postgrad.hobsons.com/>
- *The British Council's Education website:* <http://www.educationuk.org/> Search courses of study at the graduate and undergraduate level.

University websites contain prospectuses (similar to our course catalogs, but less detailed), and provide information about the institution and faculty who will teach or supervise coursework. For links to individual university websites, see the following:

- *Marshall website:* <http://www.marshallscholarship.org/studyuk/chooseuniversity>
- *Map of UK universities plus links:* <http://www.studyin-uk.com/uk-study-info/uk-university-map/>

Ratings and Rankings: Websites that rate the quality of teaching, research or overall education at universities can be useful. But the numbers don't tell the whole story-- for one thing, they represent institutions or whole fields of study and not necessarily the sub-specialty of interest to you. Use these data with caution, and rely more heavily on the detailed information on university websites, and recommendations from faculty in your field.

- *League Tables* are published in the popular press. These ratings are based on measures that include entry standards, student/faculty ratios, library and facilities expenditure, completion rates, and salaries two years out. These sources tend to emphasize undergraduate programs, but the information can also be helpful for exploring postgraduate degree courses.
 - *The Complete University Guide*
<https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>
 - *Education Guardian University Guide:*
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/universityguide>
- *Research Assessment Exercise:*
 - <http://www.ref.ac.uk/2014/>
 - <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/best-universities-uk>

The Research Assessment Exercise is carried out every five years to assess the quality of research in selected fields at UK universities. The Guardian guide includes interactive tables that you may sort on various indicators, depending on your priorities.

Understanding British Education Terminology

British degree terminology can be confusing for Americans. The information below may be helpful as you research your options. In years past many Rhodes and Marshall Scholarship recipients studied for a second bachelor's degree. Recently more American scholars have chosen a master's degree; in fact, the Marshall no longer allows a second bachelor's degree. (Since a doctoral degree requires a minimum of three years of study, Marshall and Rhodes scholars are encouraged to pursue a pre-doctoral degree.) The important distinction among master's degrees is between taught and research degrees. As you investigate courses of study, review the admission requirements for different programs and degree levels. Seek advice if in doubt.

Degrees

A *taught master's program* usually has a thesis component and possibly exams during the last third of the course. Research may grow out of coursework but is usually limited to a 10-20,000-word paper (or dissertation as the British would say). You do not need to have a thesis topic in mind when applying to a taught program. A taught master's degree, depending on the university and subject, may be:

- One year MA, MPhil, MSc, or Mlitt
- Two year MPhil or BPhil
- Professional degrees such as MBA, LL.M, MFA, MMus

A *master's in research program* requires a very clear idea of your thesis topic, since you will be working independently under a supervisor from the start, with little or no classroom work. A master's degree in research, depending on the university and subject, may be:

- One year MA, MPhil, MSc, Mres
- Two year MPhil, MSc, Mlitt

Doctorate Degrees are usually 3+ years, and may be PhD or DPhil. If you are interested in doctoral studies in the UK, find out if the master's degree you are considering can serve as a transition into the more advanced level of work.

You may also want to determine whether a particular taught degree (diploma or master's) can count toward a research degree (master's or doctorate)—some do and some don't. You also need to be sure of the duration of the particular program. A "one year" program can last for 9, 10, 11, or 12 months.

Glossary of Terms*

College: Residential unit within the university where students live, eat and socialize. In some university structures, the college shares teaching responsibilities with the larger university. In others, such as Oxford and Cambridge, the college is responsible for undergraduate education from admission through graduation, including formal instruction.

Course: means course of study—that is, a whole program of study leading to a degree or a diploma. (We might use the term “major.”)

Diploma: Postgraduate taught program that does not include a thesis (or as the British would say, a dissertation). It is used to describe a course of study that covers practical rather than intellectual skill—cookery, car maintenance, or photography. For example, someone might take a post-graduate diploma in education (a practical course mostly of classroom skills), whereas a degree in education is usually three years and has a stronger intellectual component.

Dissertation and **thesis** are loosely overlapping terms that may in some settings be used interchangeably. However, generally, a dissertation is shorter than a thesis, which is usually expected to contain some original or research component. A one-term course might well be followed by a dissertation (a paper usually of five thousand to twenty thousand words); a PhD is always examined by thesis.

Faculty is a department or a larger unit of administration.

League tables are media rankings (a little like our U.S. News and World Report rankings.)

Module is a unit of instruction. We would use the word course in the U.S.

Scheme is a strategic plan, such as, “There is a host scheme for housing international students.” It is most often used to describe a funding source, such as “are you here on a Rhodes scheme?”

Staff are the academic professors—as in the statement “Seventy-five percent of the staff at the University of Edinburgh are in 5* research departments.”

Tutor is a university officer who is responsible for teaching and supervising undergraduates in small groups or privately. Sometimes the term is used for a graduate advisor.

* From Vardaman, Elizabeth. "Keys to the United Kingdom." *Beyond Winning: National Scholarship Competitions and the Student Experience*. Ed. Suzanne McCray. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005. 89-108.