

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #578
A Guide To University In The UK
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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's part two of our three-part mini-series on the theme of "university".

[00:00:29] In case you missed part one, it was on the history of the university, from its earliest days in medieval Europe, through to the [colossal¹](#) industry it is today.

[00:00:40] Next up, in part three, we'll be looking at the scandal of Trump University, the university that, legally speaking, is no longer allowed to call itself a university.

[00:00:51] But today we will be talking about universities in the UK.

[00:00:56] How do they work, how are they different from universities in other countries, and what is life like at university in Britain?

[00:01:04] Perhaps surprisingly, I've had many requests to make this sort of episode, often from people who are considering applying to study at a British university.

¹ very large, huge

[00:01:15] So if this is you, I hope it'll be interesting, and even if you have absolutely no [intention](#)² of ever studying at a British university, I hope it'll be interesting [nonetheless](#)³.

[00:01:27] OK then, with that out of the way, let's get right into it.

[00:01:33] It is a perfectly reasonable statement to say that, as far as its place on [the world stage](#)⁴ goes, the UK is not what it once was.

[00:01:43] From global politics to economic power, the UK is clearly less important than at almost any stage in the past 500 years or so.

[00:01:54] However, there is one area in which the UK still [packs a sizable punch](#)⁵: higher education. Its universities.

[00:02:04] Out of the top 10 universities worldwide, according to the most recent QS World University Rankings, the UK has four.

[00:02:15] The US has another four, and the remaining two are ETH Zurich, in Switzerland, and the National University of Singapore.

² plan or aim

³ despite this, even so

⁴ the international level, the global scene

⁵ has a big effect or strong influence

[00:02:24] The UK is home to some of the best universities in the world, and the 150 or so universities in the UK educate almost 3 million students every year. To put it another way, one out of every 23 people in the UK is currently [enrolled at](#)⁶ a university, and according to the most recent census, 1 in 3 adults in the UK has a university degree.

[00:02:55] I am one of them, and in fact, I have degrees from two different British universities, so in this episode, I will talk you through what it is like to study at a British university more generally, as well as share my own experience.

[00:03:12] So, let's start at the beginning, and here I'll give you some background to how education works in the UK.

[00:03:21] In the UK, education is [compulsory](#)⁷ up until the year you turn 18.

[00:03:28] But it's compulsory with a [caveat](#)⁸, an [exception](#)⁹.

[00:03:33] When you are 15 or 16, most people take exams called General Certificate of Secondary Education, or GCSEs for short.

⁶ officially signed up for

⁷ something you must do, not optional

⁸ a warning or condition; something to be careful about

⁹ something that does not follow the rule

[00:03:45] Some subjects are **compulsory**, like English and Maths, but there is an element of choice, so not everyone needs to study drama or French or philosophy, or things that are **deemed**¹⁰ less **vital**¹¹.

[00:04:02] You can leave the traditional school system after this, but technically you need to **enrol in**¹² some form of training: an **apprenticeship**¹³ or something like that.

[00:04:15] If you want to go to university, you have to continue for two more years and study for your A-levels. 86% of people do this, according to the latest government data.

[00:04:29] Here, you **drop**¹⁴ **a bunch of**¹⁵ subjects that you would have studied for your GCSEs, and you only choose your favourites, the ones you are best at, or perhaps the ones your parents **insist**¹⁶ you must do.

[00:04:44] Most students choose three or four subjects, and it's already at this point that a student needs to be thinking about what they might want to study at university.

¹⁰ thought of or considered as

¹¹ very important; necessary

¹² sign up or register for something

¹³ a period of learning a job by working with someone skilled

¹⁴ leave out

¹⁵ a group of, several

¹⁶ say strongly that it must happen

[00:04:58] In your final year at school, so the year you turn 18, you need to start the application process.

[00:05:06] In Britain, this all happens through a centralised system called the UCAS, which stands for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Essentially UCAS is a [middleman¹⁷](#), and allows you to apply to up to five universities in one go, all together.

[00:05:26] You don't write to every university individually.

[00:05:30] Now, not every university has every course, and some universities are particularly well-known for certain courses and weaker in others.

[00:05:41] So, there is typically someone at your school who will help you [figure out¹⁸](#) whether university is right for you, which courses could be a good [fit¹⁹](#), which universities to apply for, and generally guide you through the application process.

[00:05:58] So, you choose your five universities and the courses you'd like to apply for.

[00:06:04] In terms of how the application process works, your school includes your grades so far, as well as your predicted grades at A-Level, your predicted final grades.

¹⁷ an organisation between two others or sides; a go-between

¹⁸ understand or find the answer to

¹⁹ something that matches well or is suitable

[00:06:17] Of course, there are all of your personal details, and then the other important bit is the personal statement.

[00:06:25] This is a single [essay²⁰](#), up to 4,000 characters long, so roughly one side of A4, where you have to explain why you want to study that subject, what makes you suitable, and what wider reading or experiences you've had.

[00:06:45] Alongside a written reference from your teachers, essentially a letter of recommendation, and your predicted grades for your A-levels, then this is all sent off to your chosen universities.

[00:07:00] Then you...wait.

[00:07:03] The most selective universities also require you to come and have a series of interviews.

[00:07:09] In my case, I applied for Oxford, University College London—or UCL—Bristol, Exeter, and I think Manchester was the last one.

[00:07:21] I was invited to interviews at both Oxford and UCL, where I was [grilled²¹](#) on my motivations to study there, asked about things I'd included in my personal statement, and so on.

²⁰ a short piece of writing

²¹ questioned in a serious or detailed way

[00:07:34] My interviews at Oxford didn't go very well, but my interviews at UCL did go pretty well.

[00:07:41] And sure enough, I was offered a place at UCL, but not by Oxford, thank you, but no thank you, I was told.

[00:07:50] The other universities, which were still good but not [ranked](#)²² quite as highly as Oxford and UCL, didn't ask me for an interview, but offered me a place in any case.

[00:08:02] And here is a [peculiarity](#)²³ of UK universities, or that might be different to how university works in your country: the place you are given is usually conditional.

[00:08:16] That means the university will say, "We will give you a place on this course, but only if you get these grades in your final A-level exams."

[00:08:27] And if you have multiple offers, they might have different grade requirements.

[00:08:33] So you might have an offer from UCL that says you need to get three As, or one from Bristol that says you need two As and a B, but you need to get an A in a particular subject.

[00:08:45] When the exam results come out in August, if you get the grades, your place is confirmed.

²² given a position or level on a list, rated or classified

²³ something that is strange or special

[00:08:53] If you don't, you may lose your [spot²⁴](#), but there is a system called Clearing that matches students with universities that have spaces available.

[00:09:03] And what happens if you don't get any offers from your chosen universities?

[00:09:08] Well, this should be quite unlikely. Someone at your school should have advised you on the types of universities to apply for, given your grades.

[00:09:21] If you have excellent grades, then you should be encouraged to apply for the best universities, and if your grades are not so good, then you should be pushed towards universities that are more likely to accept you.

[00:09:35] So, you've got your offer, you've got the required grades, and you're ready to go.

[00:09:41] Most British students move away from home to go to university; it's unlike many European countries, where most students will go to the closest university and still live at home.

[00:09:56] In the UK, people typically move away from home and will spend their first year in what's called a "halls of residence", essentially a large building with a mixture of single and double rooms, depending on the university.

[00:10:12] And as to what life is like in one of these halls of residence, well, if you put 500 or so British 18-year-olds in a building together, many of whom have never left home

²⁴ place or position

and who might have just received their first **batch**²⁵ of their student loans, well, I'm sure you can imagine a little of what life might be like.

[00:10:35] And on that subject, we must talk about finances.

[00:10:39] As you may know already, or might remember from the last episode, there are some quite **hefty**²⁶ tuition fees at British universities.

[00:10:49] University was completely free until 1997, then it was £1,000 a year, which was what I was lucky enough to pay, then it was increased to £3,000 for applications after 2004, and then increased again to £9,000 in 2012.

[00:11:09] Interestingly and importantly, Scotland is different; if you are from Scotland, your home is in Scotland, the Scottish government pays for your university fees, if you go to a Scottish university.

[00:11:24] If you go to an English university, you pay the standard English tuition fees, and people from England going to Scottish universities have to pay the standard tuition fees, they don't get free tuition.

[00:11:40] So most students from Scotland stay in Scotland for university, because they save on the fees.

²⁵ quantity or pack

²⁶ large, quite big

[00:11:48] And as for international students, well, [the sky is the limit](#)²⁷ in terms of fees.

There is no government [cap](#)²⁸, so universities are free to charge as much as they like.

[00:12:01] For example, if you are an international student and you'd like to study medicine at Cambridge, it will cost you £58,000 a year, so that's €66,000.

[00:12:16] I'll be talking about domestic, British students here, but that's how it works for international students, as a point of comparison.

[00:12:25] Living costs are a separate thing altogether, and most students will take out a loan from the government, from a government-owned not-for-profit organisation that gives out what are called maintenance loans to students.

[00:12:40] OK, so we've arrived at university, found our halls of residence, paid for our course and got our first loan payment. What next?

[00:12:50] All universities will have something called "freshers week", which is basically a huge party week for all new undergraduate students, freshmen, or freshers for short.

[00:13:03] And then begins the actual business of studying.

[00:13:07] Most undergraduate courses are three years, some are four, and more specialised ones like medicine take 5 or 6, with additional specialisations taking even

²⁷ there is no limit; anything is possible

²⁸ limit or maximum amount

longer. One of my best friends from university specialised in neuroscience, and he has only just technically finished his studies.

[00:13:29] And we both started in 2006.

[00:13:33] An important distinction between British universities and universities elsewhere, for example in the US, is that in the UK you start your course immediately; you don't take a series of general modules in your first year and later decide what you specialise in.

[00:13:53] You apply for a course, in my case, French and Italian, and within that course, there are certain modules you can take: Dante or 19th century French literature, for example.

[00:14:07] You can't apply for History and then decide you'd like to take a module on advanced statistics or microbiology. You'd have to [drop out](#)²⁹ of the course, reapply, and start it all over again.

[00:14:22] Another [peculiarity](#) of many British university courses is that there really isn't that much time spent in lectures, in class.

[00:14:32] I think I had around 10 hours of lectures per week for my class. It might not sound like much at all, especially if you are paying €10,000 a year for the [privilege](#)³⁰, but

²⁹ leave it before finishing

³⁰ special advantage or benefit

the expectation is that you do a lot of self-study and [reading around](#)³¹ the subject in the remaining time.

[00:14:55] Of course, not every university is the same, but especially at the more selective universities, a lot of your time will be spent reading and studying on your own, and then your contact time with a professor will be spent in discussion, and you are expected to have done extensive preparation beforehand.

[00:15:18] As part of my university studies, I did an ERASMUS exchange and studied at university both in Lyon, in France, and Naples, in Italy, and I had considerably more contact time with professors in both places, but it was a very different style of teaching; much more based on the professor standing in front of a large group of students and [imparting](#)³² their knowledge to them rather than my experience at UCL, which was much more collaborative: small groups, [back and forth](#)³³ discussion, and more work out of the classroom than in.

[00:15:59] So, that may or may not be different from what university is typically like in your country.

³¹ reading extra books or articles to learn more about it

³² giving or sharing

³³ talking from one person to another repeatedly

[00:16:07] Another potential difference is that in the UK, at most universities at least, most modules run all the time. In other words, you will be doing all of your modules at the same time, slowly over the course of the year.

[00:16:25] My wife is a lecturer at a university in Sweden, and with her course, students take one module at a time very intensively, so every day there will be a lecture or some form of tuition, but only for a period of a few weeks, before they move on to another.

[00:16:47] So, let's move forward with our studies. Depending on the course, students will have a mixture of ongoing coursework and exams at the end of the year.

[00:16:58] In my case, it was almost all exam-based. My course was four years, which included a year spent studying abroad, and each year counted progressively more towards my final mark.

[00:17:13] The first year was 10%, the second 15%, the third another 15%, and the final year 60%. Or something like that, and of course, every university and course will be slightly different.

[00:17:30] And on the subject of [marks³⁴](#), the UK has a very specific grading system.

[00:17:38] The top [mark³⁵](#) is a "first class" degree, which is anything over 70.

³⁴ grades or scores

³⁵ grade or score

[00:17:45] Then you can have an “upper second class” degree, or 2:1, which is a mark in the 60s, a “lower class” degree, a 2:2, which is in the 50s, or a third class degree, which is in the 40s.

[00:18:01] Now, you might be listening to this and thinking, “Hang on, you only need to get a mark of 70 to get the top grade?”

[00:18:09] In many university systems, students get almost full marks, like an Italian getting 30 out of 30 or an American getting a GPA of 4.0. If your university was like this, I can imagine a mark of 70 sounds like [nothing to write home about](#)³⁶, nothing particularly special.

[00:18:31] Not in the UK. When I graduated, only around 10% of people got 70 and above. Around half got an “upper second class” degree, which is what I got, and the rest got lower second class or third class degrees.

[00:18:49] So getting a [mark](#) above 70 is not easy, and it’s incredibly [rare](#)³⁷ for a student to get above 80.

[00:18:58] In my year, nobody got a mark of above 80, and this has included people who have gone on to teach at places like Cambridge and Yale.

[00:19:08] OK, so we have now graduated from a British university, well done us!

³⁶ nothing very special or impressive

³⁷ not common, unusual

[00:19:14] What next?

[00:19:15] Well, the real world of [gainful employment](#)³⁸ is waiting for us, or you might choose to continue studying. In my case, I did a Master's degree, partly because I had become particularly interested in China and in learning Mandarin, and partly because I didn't have a [concrete](#)³⁹ idea of what I wanted to do next.

[00:19:37] I went to a different university for my Master's; I went to one called SOAS, which is a specialist university for Oriental and African studies, still in London.

[00:19:50] And in terms of my experience, it was slightly different to undergraduate, in that the studying aspect was taken more seriously, but the overall format and style were similar.

[00:20:05] So, to [wrap things up](#)⁴⁰, I spent five years of my life at university, and enjoyed almost every minute of it.

[00:20:13] I was lucky enough to go to a very good university, one of those four in the UK that rank among the top 10 in the world.

³⁸ paid work, a job that gives money

³⁹ clear and definite

⁴⁰ finish or conclude

[00:20:22] Of course, university isn't the right choice for everyone, and many British universities rightly come under criticism for offering expensive degrees that don't deliver good value for money.

[00:20:34] For me, it was a great choice, and one I would make again [in a heartbeat](#)⁴¹.

[00:20:41] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on British Universities.

[00:20:45] I hope it's been an interesting one, no matter whether you are a budding 17-year-old thinking about applying to a British university or you are 77 years old and you can think of nothing worse than spending Fresher's Week at a British university.

[00:20:59] If you are interested in learning more about British universities, we have a couple more episodes that might be interesting: episode number 276 is all about Oxbridge [that's Oxford and Cambridge universities], and episode 513 is all about the UK university crisis. I'll put a link to both of those in the description.

[00:21:21] And as a quick reminder, this was part two of our three-part mini-series on the theme of university.

[00:21:27] In case you missed part one, we talked about the history of university in general, and next up, it'll be the sordid and scammy history of Trump University.

[00:21:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

⁴¹ very quickly, without any hesitation

[00:21:43] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Colossal	very large, huge
Intention	plan or aim
Nonetheless	despite this, even so
The world stage	the international level, the global scene
Packs a sizable punch	has a big effect or strong influence
Enrolled at	officially signed up for
Compulsory	something you must do, not optional
Caveat	a warning or condition; something to be careful about
Exception	something that does not follow the rule
Deemed	thought of or considered as
Vital	very important; necessary
Enrol in	sign up or register for something
Apprenticeship	a period of learning a job by working with someone skilled

Drop	leave out
A bunch of	a group of, several
Insist	say strongly that it must happen
Middleman	an organisation between two others or sides; a go-between
Figure out	understand or find the answer to
Fit	something that matches well or is suitable
Essay	a short piece of writing
Grilled	questioned in a serious or detailed way
Ranked	given a position or level on a list, rated or classified
Peculiarity	something that is strange or special
Spot	place or position
Batch	quantity or pack
Hefty	large, quite big
The sky is the limit	there is no limit; anything is possible
Cap	limit or maximum amount

Drop out	leave it before finishing
Privilege	special advantage or benefit
Reading around	reading extra books or articles to learn more about it
Imparting	giving or sharing
Back and forth	talking from one person to another repeatedly
Marks	grades or scores
Mark	grade or score
Nothing to write home about	nothing very special or impressive
Rare	not common, unusual
Gainful employment	paid work, a job that gives money
Concrete	clear and definite
Wrap things up	finish or conclude
In a heartbeat	very quickly, without any hesitation

Language spotlight

1. Packs a sizable punch

- **Meaning:** Has a strong effect or influence, especially when this is surprising.
- **Synonyms:** has a big impact, is powerful, makes a strong impression
- **Antonyms:** is weak, has little effect, doesn't make a difference
- **Examples:**
 - That small film **packs a sizable punch** – it really makes you think about life.
 - British education still **packs a sizable punch** on the world stage.

2. The sky is the limit

- **Meaning:** There is no limit to what can be achieved or how much something can grow.
- **Synonyms:** no limits, endless possibilities, anything is possible
- **Antonyms:** limited, restricted, impossible
- **Examples:**

- If you work hard and believe in yourself, **the sky is the limit**.
- For international students' tuition fees, **the sky is the limit**.

3. Nothing to write home about

- **Meaning:** Not very special, not impressive or exciting.
- **Synonyms:** ordinary, average, unremarkable
- **Antonyms:** amazing, excellent, impressive
- **Examples:**
 - The hotel was clean but **nothing to write home about**.
 - A mark of 70 might sound like **nothing to write home about**, but it's actually very good in the UK.

4. In a heartbeat

- **Meaning:** Very quickly or without hesitation.
- **Synonyms:** immediately, right away, instantly
- **Antonyms:** slowly, after thinking for a long time, with hesitation
- **Examples:**

- I'd move back to London **in a heartbeat** if I had the chance.
- It was such a great experience that I'd do it again **in a heartbeat**.

5. Wrap things up

- **Meaning:** To finish or bring something to an end.
- **Synonyms:** finish, conclude, end
- **Antonyms:** start, begin, continue
- **Examples:**
 - Let's **wrap things up** here and meet again tomorrow.
 - At the end of the episode, the speaker **wrapped things up** by sharing his final thoughts.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. What do students write as part of their UCAS application?
 - a) A motivation letter in their native language
 - b) An up to 4,000-character personal statement
 - c) A one-page summary of their school report
 - d) A 10-minute recorded interview

2. What happens if a student doesn't get the grades required for their university offer?
 - a) They can never go to university
 - b) They must study abroad instead
 - c) They can use a system called Clearing to find another place
 - d) They have to repeat their exams the following year

3. What usually happens after students send their university applications?

- a) They receive instant confirmation
- b) They must apply again directly to each university
- c) They wait for offers or interviews
- d) They wait to be interviewed by all universities

4. What do most British students do when they start university?

- a) Stay at home and study online
- b) Work full-time and study in the evenings
- c) Travel abroad for their first year
- d) Move away from home and live in halls of residence

5. According to the podcast, what is “Freshers’ Week”?

- a) A week of parties and activities for new students
- b) The final exam week at university
- c) A week for choosing your subjects

- d) A week of job interviews for graduates

True or False

6. The UK has become more powerful in world politics over the past 500 years.
(True/False)
7. UCAS allows students to apply to only one university at a time. (True/False)
8. Oxford and Cambridge are both mentioned as universities that interview applicants. (True/False)
9. Scottish students pay the same tuition fees as English students, even in Scotland. (True/False)
10. International students often pay higher tuition fees than British students.
(True/False)

Fill-in-the-Blank

11. It is a perfectly reasonable statement to say that, as far as its place on the world _____ goes, the UK is not what it once was.

12. You can't apply for History and then decide you'd like to take a module on advanced statistics or microbiology. You'd have to _____ out of the course, reapply, and start it all over again.
13. The expectation is that you do a lot of self-study and reading _____ the subject in the remaining time.
14. My experience at UCL was much more collaborative: small groups, back and _____ discussion, and more work out of the classroom than in.
15. The real world of _____ employment is waiting for us, or you might choose to continue studying.

Vocabulary Practice

Choose the correct definition of the bold word or expression from the podcast.

16. **Colossal**

- a) Very small
- b) Very large
- c) Very expensive
- d) Very new

17. **Compulsory**

- a) Optional
- b) Difficult
- c) Required
- d) Unusual

18. **Grilled** (as used in the podcast: “I was grilled on my motivations...”)

- a) Cooked over a fire
- b) Questioned in a detailed way
- c) Ignored by others
- d) Praised for good answers

19. **Hefty** (as in “hefty tuition fees”)

- a) Small and light
- b) Unclear
- c) Large and heavy

d) Fair and reasonable

20. Middleman

a) Someone who gives money to students

b) A student in the middle of their studies

c) A teacher at a university

d) A person or organisation that connects two sides in a process

Answers

1. b) An up to 4,000-character personal statement
2. c) They can use a system called Clearing to find another place
3. c) They wait for offers or interviews
4. d) Move away from home and live in halls of residence
5. a) A week of parties and activities for new students
6. False
7. False
8. True
9. False
10. True
11. stage
12. drop
13. around
14. forth
15. gainful
16. b) Very large
17. c) Required
18. b) Questioned in a detailed way
19. c) Large and heavy
20. d) A person or organisation that connects two sides in a process