Completing a UCAS Application
And
Applying to University

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Applying to university can be daunting. It shouldn’t be! The process itself is in fact surprisingly straightforward. All you need to decide is WHERE you would like to study, and WHICH course you are most interested in (though perhaps that’s the hardest bit...!)

To help you through the application process itself, the following handout has been prepared in chronological order: taking you from your first thoughts about university (HOW do I apply, what’s this thing called ‘UCAS’) through the various stages of the process (when do I apply? How do I hear about offers? How do I accept an offer?) to how to put together the UCAS form itself.

Good luck!

How do I apply – what is UCAS?
Rather than apply direct to a university, all university applications come via UCAS. UCAS stands for the Universities and College Admissions Service. It is the government agency that processes all university applications in the UK.

How do I use UCAS?
UCAS is an on-line service. It is very easy to use. Here are the basic steps:

Visit www.ucas.ac.uk

Follow the links to the information on Applications and complete the on-line Registration.

Registration is free. After registering UCAS will provide you with a USERNAME. You must choose a PASSWORD. You will use these to complete the application itself, and later when you want to track how your applications are progressing.

Applying: to complete the on-line application you must first get your College or School's BUZZWORD. You will need this to complete the application.

To complete the application log-on using your username and password, and provide the School or College Buzzword when prompted. The application form itself has several parts to it – these are explained below.

Having completed the application you must now PAY. The standard fee is £15. This enables you to apply for up to 5 courses. You apply to all 5 courses on the 1 form.

Having completed your parts of the form, and paid, you now click SEND TO REFEREE. Your application is now forwarded to your referee (usually your Head of Year, Careers Advisor, or Head Teacher). They complete their reference and SUBMIT THE FORM ON YOUR BEHALF TO UCAS.

Once submitted you will receive a WELCOME LETTER from UCAS. This confirms the details of your application, and provides you with an APPLICATION NUMBER. You will need this number when checking on the progress of your application over the coming months.
When do I apply? DEADLINES
UCAS has a number of deadlines.

If you are applying to Oxford or Cambridge your referee must submit your application to UCAS by 15 October of the academic year before you wish to begin your studies.

If you are applying for Geography, or Environmental Science courses other than at Oxford or Cambridge your referee must submit your application to UCAS by 15 January of the academic year before you wish to begin your studies.

Remember: your referee will need some time to complete their parts of the form. To ensure your form is submitted by the deadline you will therefore need to make sure you complete your parts of the form - and submit it to the referee - in plenty of time (at least 2 weeks before the UCAS deadline).

As a rule, the earlier you apply the better. Very popular courses, or courses at highly regarded universities, may fill-up. If you leave the application until January, for example, it is possible that the courses you have applied for may already be full. Try to submit your form in October or November of the year before you want to start studying.

Missed the deadline?
If you miss the deadline, don’t panic. You can still apply to UCAS after the 15 January. These applications are known as UCAS LATES. You can submit a Late Application up until 30 June of the academic year before you wish to begin your studies.

The majority of courses, and even very good universities, will still consider Late Applications.

If you have not applied by 30 June you can only apply in Clearing - once the exam results have been announced.

What happens next? The Application Process and Offers
You do not contact any universities directly. Instead, UCAS send your form to the Admissions Tutor for the course or courses at each university you have listed on your UCAS form.

The Admissions Tutor makes a decision as to whether to make you an offer. Before making an offer, some universities will invite you to an INTERVIEW. They will decide whether or not to make you an offer, and what that offer will be, on the basis of your application form AND your performance at interview.

Universities make 2 kinds of offer. UNCONDITIONAL offers can be made to people who already know their results and have listed these on their application. More usually, a university makes a CONDITIONAL OFFER.

Conditional Offers are usually made on the basis of the UCAS TARIFF. A typical offer for a Geography degree at a good university would be between 280 and 320 UCAS TARIFF points. The offer will specify how these points must be achieved.
Usually these points will be made up from $3 \times A2$s - where an A is worth 120 points, a B 100 points, a C 80 points, a D 60 points, and an E 40 points. Hence an offer of 300 points is the equivalent of BBB.

Some universities allow you to make up your points only from A2s, some will allow you to add points acquired from AS levels taken in subjects other than your main A2s. Some universities exclude particular subjects (for example, General Studies A2). Some will require you to include certain subjects - for example, your $3 \times A2$s may have to include A2 Geography. Some will make a pure points offer, others will require you achieve particular grades in particular subjects.

At Queen Mary we make points offers, with a typical offer of 300 points. This means you must achieve 300 points from $3 \times A2$s, excluding General Studies and usually including Geography. However, we do not require you to achieve a particular set of grades - you can make up your 300 points from any combination of A2 grades (e.g. BBB, or ABC, or AAD etc.).

The Admissions Tutor will inform UCAS of what the offer is - and UCAS will update your record on-line so that you can check to see what offers, if any, have been made to you. Some universities but not all will confirm the offer to you personally, in writing (sending you a letter to let you know that they have made you an offer via UCAS).

Who are Admissions Tutors and what are they looking for?
Universities are made up of different Departments. Each Department teaches a different subject (e.g. History, or Geography). Typically, each Department has their own Admissions Tutor. Admissions Tutors are full time academics. They spend most of their time teaching or doing research, and only some of their time doing the job of Admissions Tutor.

Admissions tutors receive your application from UCAS and decide whether or not to make you an offer. Sometimes they may invite you to interview before making a decision. Having made their decision, they inform UCAS who then inform you. You will not usually have any direct contact with the Admissions tutor - except perhaps at an interview.

Before making a decision on your application Admissions Tutors read your application form very carefully. Geography Admissions Tutors are looking - in order of importance - for 5 main things:

- **What subjects** is this person taking at A2? Are these subjects suitable for a degree in Geography?
- **What grades** is this person predicted (are they likely to be able to achieve our standard offer?)?
- **How have they performed thus far** (how did they get on in their GCSEs and AS levels)?
- **What does the referee** say about this person - how good are they at their various subjects, are they a conscientious and well organised student, are they good natured/pleasant to work with?
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• What has this person told me about themselves in their Personal Statement - are they the type of person who will do well at our university, will they offer something to us and to the other students on our course?

If they think you are taking the right A2s, are likely to achieve their offer, and will add something to the university and to other students on your proposed course they will make you an offer.

In other words, Admissions Tutors treat each and every application individually. They are not robots. They look carefully at both your performance (your GCSE and AS results) and at your potential (your predicted A2 grades, and what the referee says about you) and make a judgement as to your suitability on both of these things.

Most importantly, Admissions Tutors spend most of their time teaching their subject (and will most likely teach you if you end up going to their university). Their main concern is therefore whether they think you are genuinely interested in their subject, and have the potential to do well in it. This is one reason why Admissions Tutors are often suspicious of people who apply for more than one subject (see below) - since they wonder whether you really are interested in the subject they care so much about!

Two more things - the Reference and Personal Statement
There is a common belief that references tend always to say the same thing, and hence are perhaps not that important. They ARE. References can be crucial in helping an Admissions Tutor decide whether or not to make an offer. Two things here are especially important:

• The PREDICTED GRADES are crucial in shaping the decision as to whether or not to make an offer. However, it is important for referees to be realistic. If a person has thus far only achieved a mix of B and C grades at GCSE and AS level, but are predicted straight Bs the referee needs to make clear WHY they think the candidate's grades will improve so significantly. Most important is to be realistic. It does not help anyone if the predicted grades are unrealistically inflated. If a person is predicted 3 x Bs and made an offer on that basis, but achieves only CCD then both the candidate and university suffer.

• EXPLAINING POOR PERFORMANCE AND NON STANDARD OFFERS - sometimes a persons GCSE and AS level performance IS out of line with their predicted grades: sometimes that person is predicted to do better than in the past, and sometimes somewhat worse. In the latter case in particular it is important that the referee offers some explanation of why this might be so. For example, it may be that the student has been ill or experienced some difficulties at home. It may be that the college has struggled to provide teaching for a particular subject. These are perfectly valid reasons for a person not fulfilling their potential and it is very important an Admissions Tutor knows about them. Depending on the severity of the 'impediment' it may be possible for the Admissions Tutor to make a lower than usual offer to encourage that person to apply and because they believe that they have not yet had a chance to realise their true potential. Likewise, it may that there are very good reasons that a person has not been able to take Geography A2 (if the College they attend does not offer it, for example). In such cases it may also be possible to
make a 'non standard offer'. But such offers can only be made if a clear explanation for these things are set out in the Reference.

The Personal statement can also make a significant difference - most obviously, some courses are very competitive and most applicants have the same predicted grades (perhaps BBB or better). In such cases a really well written Personal Statement can make the difference between two otherwise similar candidates. Alternatively, if you just miss out on your Offer in August, Admissions Tutors will sometimes look at your application again to see whether they should accept you anyway. In such cases, they will look carefully at your Personal Statement (and at the notes from your interview if you were interviewed) to see whether they think you have the potential to do better than you thus far.

How many offers do I accept?
You will not be able to accept or decline any of the offers you have received until ALL the universities you have applied to have confirmed their offer with UCAS.

Once UCAS have received details of all your offers, you will need to decide which offers to accept.

You must make a FIRM acceptance of 1 of your offers, an INSURANCE acceptance of 1 other offer, and reject any other offers you have been made.

Typically, students will choose to hold the course they most want to do as their FIRM offer, and then hold a slightly lower offer as their INSURANCE in case they do not achieve their FIRM offer.

If you achieve the points needed for your FIRM offer, UCAS will automatically allocate you a place on that course in August when the exam results are announced. If you are rejected by your firm offer because you did not make the points, but DO make the points for your Insurance Offer, UCAS will automatically allocate you a place on your Insurance course.

For example, you might choose to hold Queen Mary as your FIRM offer - typically 300 points - and a lower offer (for example, 240 points from University X) as your Insurance. That way, if you do not achieve 300 points and can not attend Queen Mary you will automatically be allocated a place on your INSURANCE course.

If you have applied to UCAS by 15 January, then each university has until 31st March to inform UCAS of any offer they have made. You will then have until 4th May to decide which 2 offers to hold as your FIRM and INSURANCE offers.

If you applied between 16 January and 30 June, the universities have until 19 July to inform UCAS of their offers. You will then have until 30 August to decide which 2 offers to hold as your FIRM and INSURANCE offers.
Completing the UCAS FORM: how many courses should I apply for?
You can apply for up to 5 courses on your UCAS application. Unless there is a very good reason, it is sensible to use all 5 choices. The form that the Admissions Tutor receives only lists the courses you have applied for at their university. It does not list the other institutions you have applied to (nor are they allowed to ask you about this) – so you need not worry about the order in which you list the institutions.

Can I apply for different types of course/different subjects?
You can apply for any courses you want to. There is also nothing to stop you applying for a mixture of different subjects - for example, applying to 3 Geography courses and 3 medicine courses. But this is NOT usually a good idea.

Admissions tutors will want to be sure you have thought carefully about and are committed to studying their subject. If your application includes a mix of different subjects (perhaps at the same university) you imply that you are not clear about what you really want to study. It is also very difficult to write a convincing personal statement about 2 very different subjects.

To complete the UCAS form, you will need to include the UCAS Course Code for each course you apply to. For example, the B.A. (Hons) Degree in Geography at Queen Mary has a course code of L700. Course codes are listed on the UCAS website. They will also be listed on the web sites of each university you are applying to.

How many universities should I apply to?
You can apply to up to 5 different universities (one course at each university). Alternatively you may choose to apply to fewer – for example, applying to 3 courses at 1 university, and 2 other courses at 2 further universities.

It is only really worth applying for more than 1 course at each university if the ENTRY REQUIREMENTS/OFFERS for those courses differ significantly. For example, a university may require you to achieve 300 points for a place on their Human Geography degree, but only 260 points for a place on their Physical Geography degree.

If they do not differ very significantly it is more sensible to spread the courses between different universities.

To complete the UCAS form, you will need to include the UCAS Institutional Code for each university you apply to. For example, Queen Mary’s UCAS code is QMUL 50. Institutional codes are listed on the UCAS website. They will also be listed on the web sites of each university you are applying to.

WHICH university/course should I apply to?
Deciding which university to apply to is perhaps the most difficult thing you have to do. But there are some things to make the job easier:

- Find out about the content of the course, and what the standard offer is for that course, by visiting the website for that university. You should be able download a BROCHURE for that course or department which explains everything you need to know.
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• Look at various on-line Guides and League Tables to see how each course/university measures up. You will find an advice sheet on how to choose a university, and how to use on-line league tables etc. at: www.geog.qmul.ac.uk

• If you are thinking about a particular department or university - VISIT IT. Try to visit the department/university BEFORE you apply. Most universities run Open Days. These are an excellent way to find out more about the university and particular courses, and to get a feel for the university and the place it is in (there is NO POINT applying for a university only to find out you hate the campus, or the town or city where it is located). Open Day dates and how to visit will be listed on the web site of each university.

• Talk to teachers and advisors at school about which universities are best for your subject, and which they think might suit you.

• Talk to friends or anyone you may know who has been to the university you are thinking of applying to.

• Only apply for courses for which you are likely to achieve the standard offer. There is NO POINT in applying to study Geography at Cambridge if you are being predicted CCC. You will not be interviewed or receive an offer.

Completing the UCAS FORM: nuts and bolts
The UCAS form itself is surprisingly simple. It has 4 main sections you will need to complete:

Personal Details:
It sounds silly, but CHECK these are correct. In particular, sometimes an Admissions Tutor WILL want to contact you - to check something on your application perhaps - so it is very important you include an up to date address and phone number. If you have a mobile, include both your main home telephone number AND your mobile number. Most people will try and contact you by e-mail, so make sure you include the one they can reach you on.

Institutions and Courses you are applying to:
This is a simple list. You need to include both the INSTITUTION codes AND COURSE codes for each course/place you are applying to.

It is important to know here that these are listed ALPHABETICALLY. You do NOT need to put them in order of preference. Nor can a university (for example at an interview) ask you to tell them where else you have applied, or which course/university you most want to attend.

Qualifications:
Fill this part in very carefully. There are separate parts of the form for the qualifications you already have, and for those you are about to take. Make sure you put the right ones in the appropriate box. Make sure you clearly list the TYPE (i.e. GCSE,
AS, or A2) of each qualification. It is very frustrating for Admissions Tutors to have to try and work out precisely which A2s you are taking.

**Personal Statement**
This is the part of the application form that students get most worried about - there is no need!

**Purpose of the Personal Statement**
The Personal Statement is a chance for you to explain to the Admissions Tutor why you want to study that subject at university, to show something of your knowledge of that subject, and to give them some more information about yourself - your interests and skills, and what you might contribute to life at university and to other students.

In other words, it is an opportunity to tell the Admissions Tutor more about yourself: with information that they can not get just from your qualifications or your reference. With fewer and fewer universities now interviewing their applicants, it may be the only chance you have to put these things across.

**Targeting the Statement**
The idea of a Personal Statement is quite straightforward - you are, in effect, writing a letter to the Admissions Tutor explaining why you want to study that subject, and what you think you can offer to the universities you have applied to. The difficulty is that you are sending the same letter to up to 5 people!

But in fact, all this means is that you can not target the letter too closely to 1 particular course/university. For example, if part of your statement is given over to why you are so keen to study Geography at Queen Mary I might like this, but it will not go down too well with the Admissions Tutors at the other universities you have applied to!

This is one reason why it is also not a good idea to apply for more than one subject. If your Personal Statement is full of reasons why you want to study Medicine, how will it be read by a Geography Admissions Tutor? Not very well!

**Format and style**
There are some very clear DOs and DON'Ts when it comes to format and style:

DO make sure that whatever you write is clearly expressed (good grammar) and correctly spelt. DO NOT write in some kind of short hand or ‘text speak’ (you’d be surprised - I have read Personal Statements that would have been fine on a mobile phone, but looked very bad indeed on an official application form). Likewise, DO make sure that your statement is properly laid-out/presented.

AVOID ‘purple prose’. There is nothing worse than reading of someone’s “love for the colours and majesty of volcanoes”, or that someone has “been fascinated by Geography ever since I was a child”. Really? Exactly how young did your passion for Geography begin?!

The Personal Statement is the only piece of your own work that an Admissions Tutor sees. You need to convince them that you are careful and diligent student who cares...
about the quality of their work. If you don't care enough to ensure your Personal Statement is well written and well laid out, will you care about your work at university?

Content of the Personal Statement
It is very difficult to offer specific advise on exactly what you should include in your personal statement, or how precisely you should write it, because different Admissions Tutor have different ideas of what makes a good Personal Statement (not what you want to hear I am sure - but the point is, we are individuals with our own preferences).

There are, however, a few Golden Rules you should remember when putting together a Personal Statement:

Rule 1 Establish your commitment and motivation to study
Show enthusiasm
Demonstrate knowledge
Say what particularly interests you
Mention career aspirations

Rule 2 Emphasise your academic interests
Write about your current studies
Talk about skills you have developed

Rule 3 If you have chosen a more vocational degree (e.g. medicine, law), discuss ‘work’ experience
Explain what you learnt from experience.
Discuss likes and dislikes.
Describe how the experience may help you in your proposed studies.

Rule 4 Show your awareness of the broader context
Demonstrate an understanding of current affairs, especially where relevant to chosen subject
Mention if you read quality newspaper, subscribe to journals and periodicals etc.

Rule 5 Show you are a responsible person who will cope with the independence and freedom associated with university study
What positions of responsibility have you had at school?
Write about your part time job or voluntary work? Do you have care responsibilities etc.

Rule 6 Write about your outside interests and achievements (think about the skills involved and how they might be relevant to studying for a degree):
Playing musical instruments
Sports
Duke of Edinburgh etc.
Etc.

Rule 7 Tell the truth
If you get invited to interview, a question about a ‘fabricated’ achievement could lead to complete humiliation
Admissions tutors don't like to take risks and would reject an application if there is any suggestion parts of it are not true.

How can you put all these things together? Remembering what I have said about personal preference, here are the things I look out for in a good personal statement:

A clear (and short) opening paragraph that explains why you want to study Geography at University. This may be because you feel it is the subject that best helps you understand the world around you and offers some ideas on how to make sense, and perhaps respond, to some of the most pressing problems of our time (for example, global poverty, or global warming); it may because you have a love of travelling and are fascinated by different societies and cultures, or how the landscapes of different places have been formed; it may be because you are drawn to a subject that brings the theories you learn in a classroom alive and allows you to see how things work in the real world (Geography is a subject that places a good deal of value on field work); it may simply be because it is your favourite subject at school, or the one you are best at. Exactly what you say here is up to you - but I like statements that have some reference to something like the above.

A second paragraph that tells me in more detail about the particular areas of the subject you are interested in, and some evidence of your knowledge of these issues. Write about which parts of the subject - human of physical, or both - you like best. But also offer some detail. For example, it is often good to write about a particular set of ideas you have explored in class recently (population change, world debt, or coastal erosion) or give an example of a project you have recently done: What did it set out to explore? How did you conduct the study? What did you find out?). You might also like to write about something specific you have read - a particular theory, or book- that you have found especially interesting.

Be warned: it is quite likely that you will be asked about whatever you write about in this part of the statement in your interview - so make sure you can talk with confidence about that project, or that book. If you can not, do not write about it.

You might like to finish this paragraph with something about the other subjects you are studying at A2 and how they have helped you with your Geography, or how your Geography has helped you with them. For example, you might like to reflect on how your Geography has helped you with a subject like Sociology, or vice-versa.

A 3rd paragraph that tells the Admissions Tutor more about you. It is not enough here to simply provide a list of your accomplishments (that you are captain of the school netball team,) or your hobbies (you love reading, and read National Geographic regularly). An Admissions Tutor will be more interested in how you can relate these accomplishments and interests to two things: how do they relate to your desire to study Geography? What do they tell us about your character and skills? For example, it may be you have done some voluntary work - something that is evidence of your interest in wider society; if you particularly enjoy climbing, is there anything you can say about the places you have visited on various climbing trips? Alternatively, if you have completed a Duke of Edinburgh award, or worked part-time in a shop, what do these things tell the
Admissions Tutor about your time management or organisational skills, your perseverance or your ability to work as part of a team?

In your final paragraph, you might then like to briefly reflect on why it is you want to come to university at all, what you are particularly looking forward to of university life, and what you might offer your fellow students and the university during your time there.