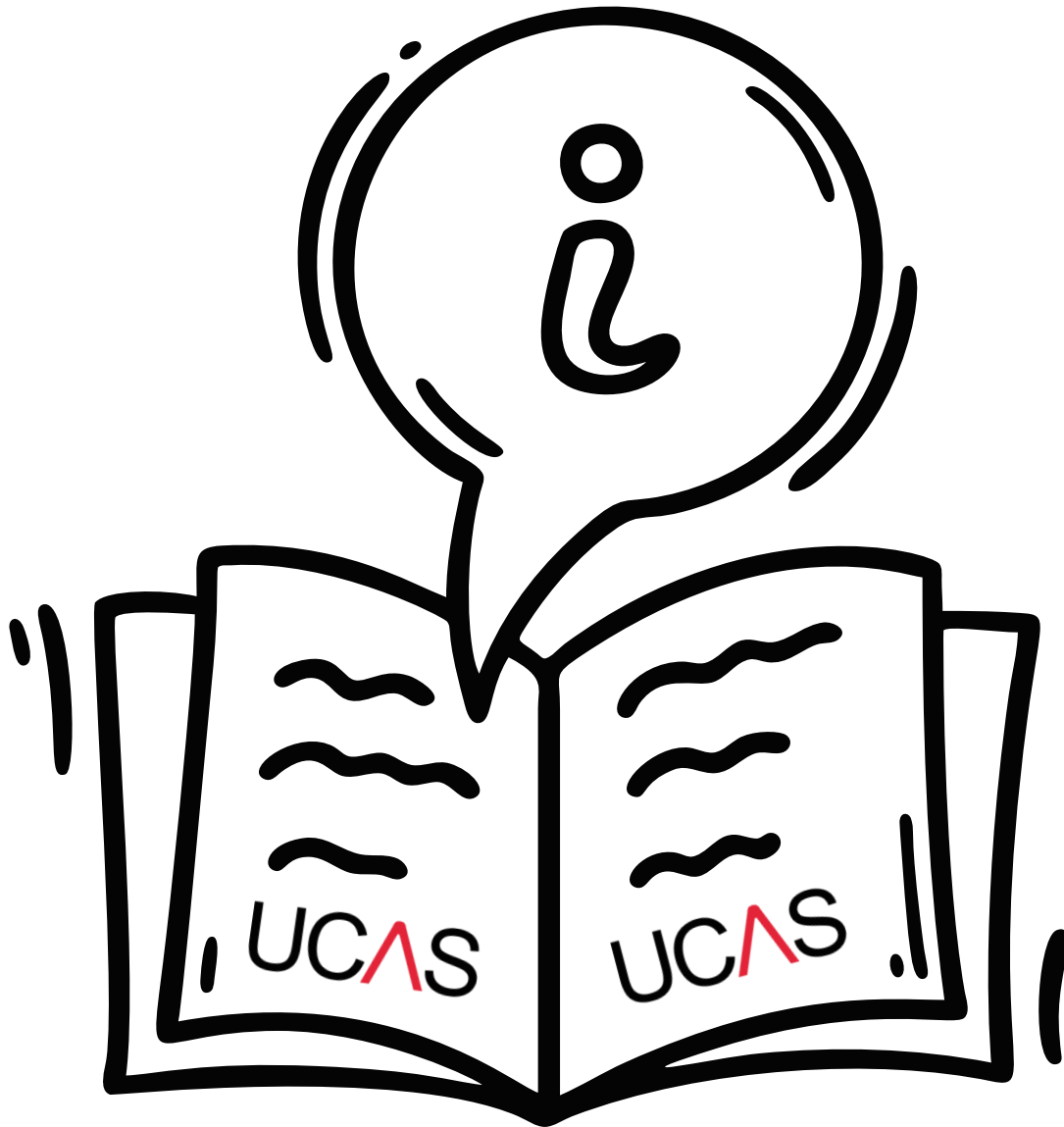


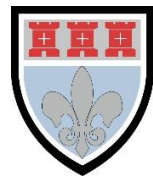


St Mary's Sixth Form



UCAS Information Booklet

For 2026 entry



Introduction

Welcome to the St Mary's Sixth Form UCAS Information Booklet for 2026 entry. This guide has been created to support both students and parent/carers throughout the university application process. Whether you are familiar with higher education applications or are approaching this experience for the first time, we understand that the UCAS process can appear complex and, at times, overwhelming. Our aim is to provide clear, comprehensive guidance to ensure that every applicant feels confident and well-prepared at each stage.

The UCAS process marks a significant milestone in a student's academic journey, offering a gateway to a wide range of exciting opportunities for further study and future careers. However, success requires thorough planning, considered decision-making, and sustained commitment. It is never too early to begin thinking carefully about course choices, potential career paths, and how to present oneself effectively to universities.

Within this booklet, you will find a step-by-step guide to the application process, advice on how to research courses and institutions, tips for writing a strong personal statement, and key information on important deadlines. We have also included guidance for parent/carers, outlining practical ways in which you can provide support without taking control of the process, ensuring that students maintain ownership of their own applications — a vital skill for success at university and beyond.

Throughout the coming months, students will have access to a variety of resources, workshops, and individual guidance sessions with our dedicated Sixth Form team. We are committed to helping each student submit a high-quality application that truly reflects their potential and aspirations.

We encourage you to refer to this booklet regularly and to make full use of the support available. We are confident that, with careful preparation and engagement, every student can approach the UCAS process with assurance and ambition. We look forward to working closely with you during this important stage of your academic journey.



What is UCAS?

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is the central organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses across the United Kingdom. Established to simplify the application process, UCAS acts as a bridge between applicants and universities, ensuring that applications are submitted in a consistent and organised manner.

Through UCAS, students can apply to up to five different courses at a range of universities and colleges using a single online application form. Applicants submit their academic information, a personal statement, and a reference, which are then forwarded to their chosen institutions. Universities use the information provided to decide whether to make an offer of a place.

All applications are managed through the UCAS Hub, an online platform that allows students to complete their applications, track offers and respond to decisions. The UCAS Hub also provides a range of resources, including course finders, personal statement advice, and finance information, helping students make informed choices throughout the process.

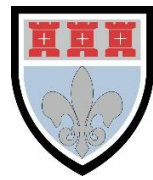
UCAS operates to strict deadlines, and it is important that students and parent/carers are aware of these to ensure that no opportunities are missed. Different courses may have different deadlines — for example, applications to Oxford and Cambridge, as well as to Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Medicine courses, must be submitted earlier than applications for most other subjects.

Understanding how UCAS works is fundamental to navigating the application process successfully. This booklet will guide you through each stage of completing a UCAS application, ensuring that you are fully informed and prepared to make the most of the opportunities available.

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Key Deadlines for 2026 Entry:

The university application process operates according to a strict calendar, with several key deadlines that all applicants must meet. It is essential that students and parent/carers are fully aware of these dates to ensure that applications are submitted on time and that no opportunities are missed. Missing a deadline may significantly reduce the range of courses and institutions available.

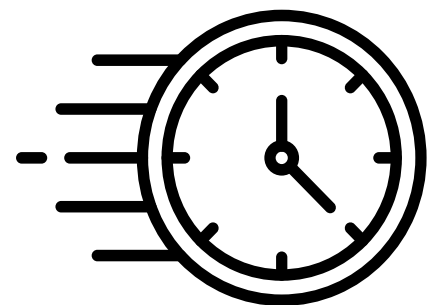


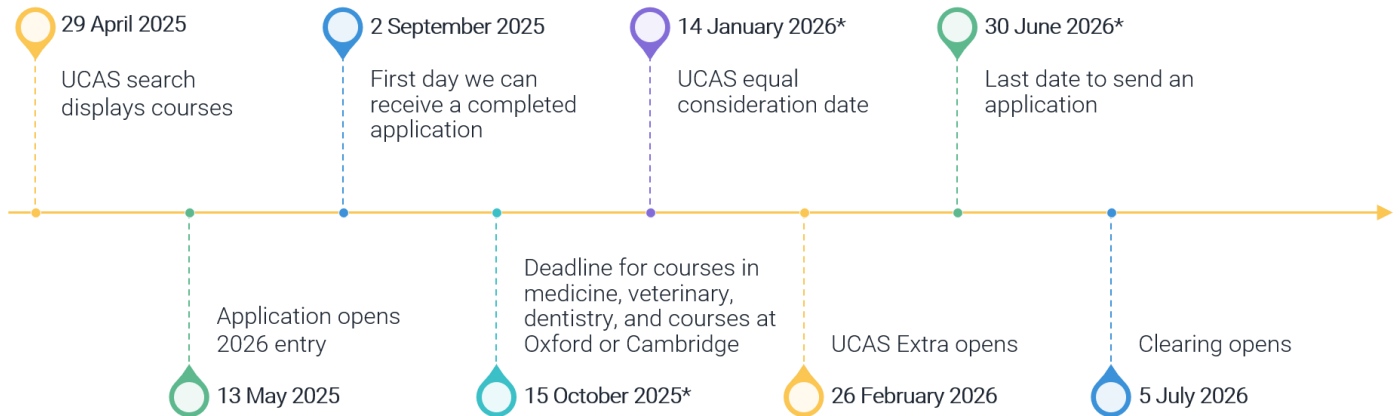
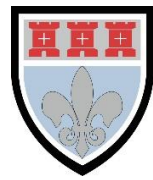
Below is an overview of the key dates for the 2026 UCAS cycle:

- **January 14, 2026:** Deadline for the majority of undergraduate courses.
- **October 15, 2025:** Deadline for applications to Oxford and Cambridge, and for most medicine, dentistry, and veterinary courses.
- **June 30, 2026:** Final deadline for all applications.
- **31st March 2026:** Reintroduced advisory deadline for encouraging earlier decision-making by universities.
- **13th May 2026:** "Reject by default" deadline.

Other Important Dates:

- **February 26, 2026:** UCAS "Extra" opens for applicants who have used their five initial choices and haven't received an offer.
- **31st March 2026:** Universities and colleges must make decisions on applications received by the 31st March advisory deadline.
- **6th May 2026:** Decline by default date (DBD) for applications received by the 31st March advisory deadline.
- **July 4, 2026:** Clearing opens for eligible applicants.
- **October 19, 2026:** Deadline for adding Clearing choices.





It is highly advisable that students aim to complete and submit their applications well before the published deadlines. This allows time for unforeseen delays, including technical issues, personal statement revisions, and securing references.

Our internal deadlines for application submission are:

- 10th October 2025: Early Entry
- 13th December 2025: All Other Entries



Choosing Courses and Universities

Choosing the right course and university is a critical part of the UCAS application process. It requires careful research, honest reflection, and a clear understanding of personal goals, strengths, and interests. Both the course content and the environment of the institution should suit the student's individual aspirations and preferred style of learning.

When selecting courses, students should consider the following factors:

Subject Interest and Strengths: It is important to choose a subject that genuinely interests you and plays to your academic strengths. Enjoyment of the subject often leads to greater success at university.

Entry Requirements: Each course will have specific entry requirements, often in the form of A-Level (or equivalent) grades and, sometimes, particular subject prerequisites. It is essential to check these carefully and ensure that predicted grades are aligned with them.

Course Content: Courses with the same title may vary considerably between universities. Students should review course modules, assessment methods, and any opportunities for work placements or study abroad.

University Location and Type: Factors such as distance from home, whether the university is campus-based or city-based, and the general environment can significantly influence the student experience.

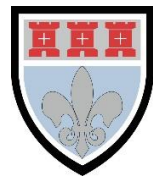
Reputation and Rankings: While league tables can offer some insight, they should not be the sole basis for decision-making. Subject-specific rankings and factors like student satisfaction scores can be more relevant.

Support Services and Facilities: Consideration should be given to the availability of academic support, career services, mental health resources, and extracurricular activities.

Future Career Prospects: Some courses are accredited by professional bodies and may be essential for certain career paths. Investigating graduate employment rates and further study options can provide valuable information.

Students are strongly encouraged to attend university open days, either in person or virtually, to gain a real sense of the environment and ask questions directly. Online resources such as the UCAS website, university prospectuses, and platforms like Unifrog can support thorough research. In addition, the Sixth Form hosts a number of different universities to give workshops and sessions to our students to give them a flavour of the different experiences they may have.

Choosing a balanced range of courses — including a mix of aspirational, realistic, and safe choices — is advised. A thoughtful and well-researched selection maximises the chance of receiving offers and ensures that students are happy with all their potential options.



Understanding Entry Requirements

Entry requirements form a crucial part of university applications. They are the academic and, sometimes, non-academic criteria that students must meet to be eligible for consideration for a particular course. Understanding these requirements is essential to making informed and realistic choices.

Academic Entry Requirements:

- **Predicted Grades:** Universities make offers based on students' predicted grades, which reflect their expected final results at A-Level (or equivalent). It is important that students apply to courses where their predicted grades are broadly in line with or slightly above the entry requirements.
- **Subject-Specific Requirements:** Some courses require certain A-Level subjects. For example, Engineering typically requires Mathematics and Physics, while Medicine often requires Chemistry and Biology. Students must check individual course specifications carefully.
- **GCSE Requirements:** Many courses have minimum GCSE requirements, particularly in English and Mathematics. Some competitive courses may also specify a minimum number of top grades at GCSE level. It is important students are aware of these before they apply for different courses.

Additional Requirements:

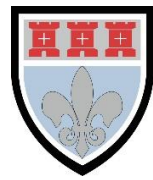
- **Admissions Tests:** Some courses and universities require applicants to sit additional tests, such as the UCAT (for Medicine) or the LNAT (for Law). Registration and preparation for these tests must be done separately and in advance.
- **Portfolios and Auditions:** Creative courses such as Fine Art, Architecture, or Music may require a portfolio submission or an audition as part of the application process.
- **Work Experience:** Particularly for vocational courses such as Medicine, Dentistry, and Teaching, relevant work experience can strengthen an application and sometimes forms part of the entry criteria.

Types of Offers:

- **Conditional Offers:** The student will be accepted if they meet the specific conditions, usually certain grades in their A-Level results.
- **Unconditional Offers:** The student has already met the entry requirements and is guaranteed a place. These are rare and usually offered where qualifications are already completed.

Understanding entry requirements helps students to choose courses sensibly and to focus on achieving the grades and experience needed. It is advisable to have at least one or two choices with slightly lower entry requirements than predicted grades as a safety net, while still being ambitious with some choices.

Finally, it is worth noting that universities occasionally accept students who narrowly miss their offers, especially if their overall application is strong, but this cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, careful planning and honest assessment of predicted achievements remain essential.



The UCAS Application: Step-by-Step

Completing the UCAS application is a vital part of the university admissions process. It requires care, accuracy, and attention to detail. Each section of the application must be completed thoroughly, as universities make their initial assessments based largely on this information.

Below is a detailed guide to each part of the UCAS application:

Step 1: Registering on the UCAS Hub

Students must first register for an account on the UCAS Hub at www.ucas.com.

During registration, applicants will be asked to provide some basic personal information and select their level of study (Undergraduate). It is important to keep login details secure, as the Hub will be used throughout the application cycle.

Step 2: Completing Personal Details

This section gathers essential personal information including:

Full name (must match official documents)

Date of birth

Nationality and country of residence

Contact details (address, telephone number, email)

Funding arrangements (for example, whether applying for student finance)

Students must ensure all information is accurate and kept up to date, as universities will use these details to communicate important information.

Step 3: Adding Course Choices

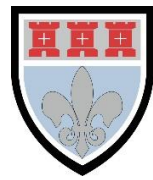
Applicants can apply for up to five courses, which can be at different universities or at the same university.

Key points to note:

Choices are not ranked in order of preference — universities cannot see where else an applicant has applied.

Students applying for Medicine, Dentistry, or Veterinary courses are restricted to four choices in those areas but may use their fifth choice for a different subject.

It is crucial to check course codes and institution codes carefully when making selections.



Step 4: Entering Education History

In this section, students must list all secondary schools, sixth forms, and colleges they have attended, along with all qualifications already achieved or currently being studied.

Details required include:

Qualification type (e.g., GCSE, A-Level)

Subjects taken

Awarding bodies

Grades achieved (for completed qualifications)

Subjects and qualifications being taken in the current year

Accuracy is essential, as discrepancies may lead to delays or issues later in the admissions process.

Step 5: Adding Employment History

If students have any paid work experience, they should list it here.

For each employment, students will need to include:

Employer name

Job title

Start and end dates

Nature of work

Although part-time or temporary work is not compulsory to include, doing so can demonstrate valuable skills such as responsibility and time management.

Step 6: Writing the Personal Statement

The personal statement is a critical part of the application.

It is the applicant's opportunity to explain:

Why they wish to study their chosen subject

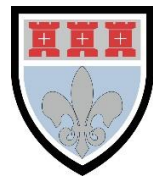
What skills, experiences, and achievements prepare them for university study

How their ambitions link to their course and future career plans

The statement must be the student's own work and must not exceed 4,000 characters or 47 lines.

Universities place significant weight on the personal statement, particularly for competitive courses.

(A detailed guide to writing a personal statement is provided in Section 7.)



Step 7: Adding a Reference

The reference is written by Mr Turnbull (Assistant Headteacher – Sixth Form)

It provides universities with an independent assessment of the student's academic abilities, character, and suitability for higher education.

The Sixth Form will coordinate the writing and uploading of references to UCAS on behalf of their students. It is important that students provide any necessary information to the Sixth Form when this is requested in the UCAS process.

Step 8: Paying and Submitting the Application

Before submitting, students must:

Carefully review all sections for accuracy

Ensure spelling and grammar are correct

Confirm that they are happy with their personal statement

There is an application fee, payable online at the time of submission.

For 2026 entry, the fee is expected to be approximately:

£28.50 for a single choice

£37.00 for two to five choices

Once payment is made, the application is sent electronically to UCAS and processed before being sent to the chosen universities and colleges.

Final Checks and Important Reminders:

Accuracy is crucial: Errors can cause delays or result in lost offers.

Start early: A rushed application is more likely to contain mistakes.

Save regularly: The UCAS Hub allows students to save work and return later.

Stay organised: Keep a record of all correspondence and login information.

Once submitted, students can monitor the progress of their application and any responses from universities through the UCAS Hub Track system.





The Personal Statement



For students applying in this cycle, the traditional personal statement is being replaced with a new structure based on answering specific questions. This change has been introduced to provide a fairer, clearer, and more supportive way for students to demonstrate their suitability for higher education.

Rather than writing one continuous body of text, students will now respond to a set of structured prompts within the UCAS Hub. Each response will have a word or character limit. These structured questions allow students to focus on the key aspects of their preparation and motivation for higher education.

Below is an overview of what students can expect, along with guidance on how to approach each section:

The Structured Questions

The questions are as follows:

1. Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Students should explain their interest in the subject, when and how it developed, and why they wish to study it at university level.

Tip: Reflect on specific moments, experiences, or academic topics that inspired you.

Tip: Avoid vague statements; show genuine passion and specific understanding.

Students must consider their motivations for studying the course, the knowledge they have of this subject and their interest in it, and their future plans and why this course is a good fit for them.

2. How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

Students should describe how their current studies (A-Levels or equivalent) have given them skills and knowledge relevant to their chosen course.

Tip: Mention specific topics, projects, coursework, or extended essays.

Tip: Highlight any independent research or additional reading undertaken.

Students must consider how their subjects relate to the chosen subject area, what relevant skills they have which make them a great candidate and any relevant educational achievements in this field.

3. What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

This is an opportunity to talk about transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership, communication, and time management.

Tip: Provide examples from academic work, part-time jobs, volunteering, or hobbies.



Tip: Be reflective, not descriptive — explain what you learnt and how it reinforced your decision.

Tip: Focus on what you have gained from the activity, linking it back to university study where possible.

Some courses, especially vocational ones (e.g., Medicine, Law, Education), may value relevant work experience or volunteering. Students may describe how involvement in clubs, sports, music, competitions, or other activities has developed useful skills. Students may also wish to include achievements they have had outside of school or discuss personal life experiences or responsibilities that they have had.

The personal statement will still be 4000 characters in total; this includes spaces. This is the same number of characters as in previous application cycles.

The content of the personal statement will remain broadly the same - it will just be split across three sections rather than one longer piece of text. The expectation for what students need to cover within the personal statement is mostly unchanged from current guidance.

Approach to Writing Strong Responses

Be specific: Avoid generalisations; give concrete examples that demonstrate your suitability.

Be reflective: Focus not just on what you have done, but what you have learnt and how you have grown.

Be honest: Universities value authenticity. Present your genuine experiences and interests.

Be concise: Stay within the word or character limits. Choose your words carefully to make every sentence count.

Start early: Give yourself time to draft, review, and refine each answer carefully.

The Sixth Form Pastoral Team will offer support through the drafting process. Students will also have access to workshops and review sessions to help them produce strong, well-structured responses.

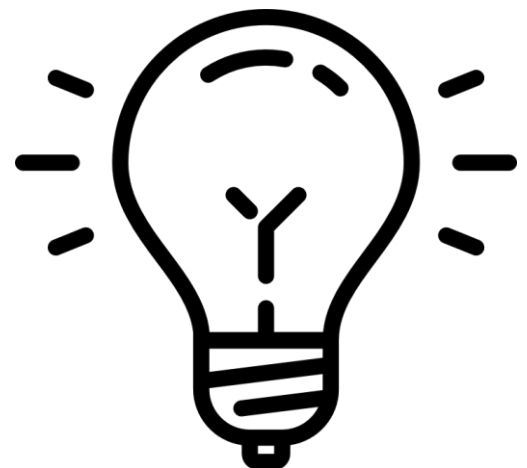
Key Advice for Students and Parent/Carers:

Encourage early reflection on experiences, skills, and academic interests.

Understand that each question requires a focused and tailored response.

Recognise that this new approach offers a clearer framework, especially for students who might find writing a full-length personal statement daunting.

Students are supported with writing their personal statements from their Form Tutor and the rest of the Sixth Form Pastoral Team. Students will complete several drafts of the personal statement which will be reviewed by different members of staff.





The deadlines for submission are:

Personal Statement – Early Entry

20th June 2025: First Draft (Submitted on Teams)

19th September 2025: Second Draft – Early Entry (Submitted on Teams)

3rd October 2025: Final Draft – Early Entry (Submitted on Teams)

Personal Statement – Normal Entry

20th June 2025: First Draft (Submitted on Teams)

17th October 2025: Second Draft (Submitted on Teams)

7th November 2025: Final Draft (Submitted on Teams)

Ensuring students hit these deadlines is crucial as it allows them to access as much support and feedback as possible in this process.



The Role of Predicted Grades and References

Predicted grades and academic references are crucial components of the UCAS application process. Universities rely heavily on both to assess a student's potential and suitability for their chosen course, particularly as final examination results will not yet be available at the point of application.

Predicted Grades

What are Predicted Grades?

Predicted grades are the grades that a student's teachers believe they are most likely to achieve at the end of their current course of study, based on evidence gathered from assessments, coursework, mock examinations, and overall performance. These predictions are submitted alongside the UCAS application and play a role in a university's decision-making process.

How are Predicted Grades Decided?

Predicted grades are based on:

Holistic performance in internal tests, mock examinations, homework and coursework.

Attitude to learning, and consistency over time.

A professional judgement made by subject teachers, in consultation with heads of department and the Sixth Form team.

Each school or college will have its own process for determining predicted grades. At St Mary's, the overall decision on predicted grades is made by Mr Turnbull (Assistant Headteacher – Sixth Form). This is based on information from the different departments, but it is advised that if you wish to discuss predicted grades, students must do this with Mr Turnbull.

The Sixth Form will award predicted grades that are aspirational must are also realistic, giving students the opportunity to reach for their full potential. Grade achieved solely in mock examinations will not be necessarily used as predicted grades for UCAS.

Why are Predicted Grades Important?

Universities use predicted grades to:

Assess whether a student is likely to meet the entry requirements for their chosen course.

Form the basis of any conditional offers made.

Help differentiate between applicants, particularly for highly competitive courses.



Key Advice for Students and Parent/Carers:

Students should aim to demonstrate their capabilities in their subjects consistently throughout Year 12 and Year 13.

Students are encouraged to engage fully with their studies and seek support early if any difficulties arise.

It is important to recognise that while predicted grades are influential, they are one part of a holistic application that includes the personal statement, academic references, GCSE results and, in some cases, admissions tests or portfolios.

Academic References

What is an Academic Reference?

The reference is a statement written by the school. At St Mary's, this reference is written and signed off by Mr Turnbull (Assistant Headteacher – Sixth Form), with contributions from the appropriate Pastoral staff and subject teachers.

The reference provides universities with an overview of the student's academic achievements, work ethic, personal qualities, and overall potential for success in higher education.

What Does the Reference Include?

The student's academic performance and strengths in subject areas.

The student's attitude to learning, commitment, and resilience.

Relevant achievements, such as leadership roles, awards, or participation in Sixth Form enrichment activities / the wider life of the school.

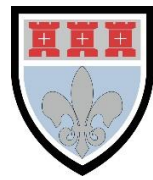
Any extenuating circumstances that may have impacted the student's education.

A statement endorsing the student's suitability for higher education study.

At our Sixth Form, references are carefully crafted to highlight the individual strengths and aspirations of each applicant. Students are usually asked to provide information about their course choices, career ambitions, extracurricular activities, and any personal achievements to assist in writing a tailored and supportive reference to complement information that the school has already recorded throughout their time in the Sixth Form.

Students will not write their own references; however, they can assist by providing up-to-date and accurate information about themselves. The more information they provide, the more detailed and precise the reference can be.

References must be professional, evidence-based, and honest. Universities rely on them as an objective measure of an applicant's potential.



Key Advice for Students and Parent/Carers:

Students should complete any reference information sheets or forms promptly and thoughtfully.

Students should keep a record of their achievements and experiences to share with the school.

Students should trust that the Sixth Form team will present each applicant in the strongest and fairest light possible giving them the best possible chance of success with their application.

Applying to Oxbridge, Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science

Applications to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge — collectively known as Oxbridge — and to courses in Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science follow a slightly different and more demanding process than standard undergraduate applications. These fields are highly competitive, and applicants must meet additional requirements and adhere to earlier deadlines.

Understanding these differences is essential for students who wish to apply for these courses, and students are given specialised mentors to help with this application process.

Earlier Application Deadline

Students applying for any of the following must submit their completed UCAS application by 15 October 2025 (18:00 UK time):

Any undergraduate course at the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge

Medicine (including Veterinary Medicine and Veterinary Science)

Dentistry

This deadline applies to all elements of the application: structured responses, course choices, references, and predicted grades.

Late applications will not be considered under any circumstance.

Admissions Tests

Many courses at Oxbridge and in Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science require applicants to sit an admissions test. These tests are designed to assess aptitude, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and subject-specific knowledge.

Examples of commonly required tests include:

UCAT (University Clinical Aptitude Test): Required by most UK medical and dental schools.

MAT (Mathematics Aptitude Test): Used for mathematics and related fields.

PAT (Physics Aptitude Test): Used for physics and related fields.

LNAT (Law National Aptitude Test): Required for Law at certain universities, including Oxford.

TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment): Required for some courses at Oxford (e.g., Economics and Management, PPE).



Students must register for these tests separately and well in advance — the UCAS application does not automatically register them. This must be done separately of the school, and the assessments take place at a local assessment centre, not the school.

Test preparation is crucial; many Sixth Forms offer workshops, practice sessions, and advice.

Test dates are strictly scheduled, often in the summer or early autumn before application deadlines. If students miss the deadline, then the students can not sit the assessment.

Students are encouraged to research carefully which tests are required for their course and institution, as requirements vary.

Written Work and Portfolios

Certain courses, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge, require the submission of written work or portfolios as part of the application process.

Examples include:

Essays or coursework already completed during A-Level study.

Creative portfolios for courses such as Fine Art or Architecture.

Students must prepare these submissions carefully, ensuring they meet the specific guidelines issued by the universities. It is the student's responsibility to check deadlines for submission and formatting requirements.

Interviews

Interviews are a key element of the selection process at Oxford, Cambridge, and for Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science courses at many universities.

Key features of university interviews include:

Academic focus: Interviews assess a student's intellectual potential, subject knowledge, and ability to think critically under pressure.

Discussion-based questions: Students are often asked to engage with unfamiliar material or problem-solving exercises.

Personal qualities: For vocational degrees like Medicine, qualities such as empathy, communication skills, and ethical reasoning are also evaluated.



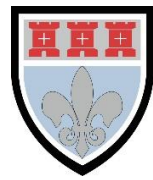
Preparation tips:

Engage in wider reading around the chosen subject.

Practice discussing academic topics aloud to develop confidence especially in our Aspire to Oxbridge and Medicine and Dentistry Societies.

Participate in mock interviews offered by the Sixth Form.

It is important to understand that interviews are designed to be challenging; they test potential, not just existing knowledge.



Work Experience

For Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science, relevant work experience is highly valued and sometimes formally required.

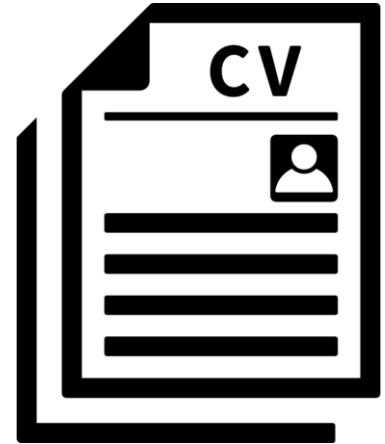
Examples include:

Clinical placements in hospitals, dental surgeries, or veterinary practices.

Shadowing professionals in relevant fields.

Volunteering in care settings or with animals.

Students should start organising work experience placements as early as possible, as opportunities can be limited and competitive. Reflecting thoughtfully on what was learned during these experiences is just as important as completing them.



Additional Considerations for Oxbridge Applicants

Choosing a College:

Applicants to Oxford and Cambridge must either apply to a specific college or make an open application (where the university assigns them a college). Research into college ethos, size, facilities, and subject offerings can be helpful but is not essential, as teaching standards are uniformly high.

Super-curricular Activities:

Oxbridge places strong emphasis on super-curricular activities — learning undertaken beyond the A-Level syllabus, such as wider reading, public lectures, online courses, or independent research projects. Evidence of super-curricular engagement should be reflected in the student's responses. Students are currently directed to complete one hour of Super-curricular activities each week.

Academic Excellence:

Applicants must demonstrate consistently excellent academic performance. Oxbridge typically expects a strong portfolio of top GCSE grades, high predicted A-Level results (often AAA or similar), and a sustained commitment to intellectual growth.



Finance and Student Loans

Understanding the financial aspects of higher education is essential for students and parent/carers. Planning ahead and being well-informed about tuition fees, student loans, and living costs can help ease concerns and ensure that students are able to focus fully on their studies once at university.

Tuition Fees

Most universities in the United Kingdom charge tuition fees for undergraduate courses.

For students starting in 2026, tuition fees at English universities are expected to remain up to £9,535 per year for UK (Home) students, although this figure could be subject to government review.

Tuition fees for international students are significantly higher and vary depending on the institution and course.

Tuition fees cover the cost of teaching, access to facilities such as libraries and laboratories, and support services.

Fees are not paid upfront. Instead, eligible students can apply for a Tuition Fee Loan from the government to cover the full cost.

Tuition Fee Loans

The Tuition Fee Loan is paid directly to the university or college on the student's behalf.

Students only start repaying the loan once they have graduated and are earning above a certain income threshold (more detail on repayments below).

If a student leaves their course early, they may still be liable for any tuition fees incurred up to that point.

Applications for Tuition Fee Loans are made through the Student Loans Company (SLC) and open in the spring before the course starts — typically around March or April 2026 for September 2026 entry. This must be completed by the student themselves, and this happens independently of the Sixth Form.

Maintenance Loans

In addition to Tuition Fee Loans, students can apply for a Maintenance Loan to help cover living costs, such as:

Accommodation

Food

Books and course materials

Travel

Other day-to-day expenses



The amount a student can borrow depends on household income, where they live and study, and whether they will be living at home, away from home, or in London (where costs are higher).

A portion of the Maintenance Loan is available to all eligible students, but a full assessment may provide access to larger sums. Applications for Tuition Fee Loans are made through the Student Loans Company (SLC) and open in the spring before the course starts — typically around March or April 2026 for September 2026 entry. This must be completed by the student themselves, and this happens independently of the Sixth Form. Students will need help from parents/carers as the household income is required in the application form.

The Maintenance Loan is paid directly to the student in three instalments — one at the start of each term.

Additional Financial Support

Students may also be eligible for extra financial help, such as:

Scholarships and bursaries offered by universities based on academic achievement, financial need, or other criteria.

Grants for specific needs, such as the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs).

Support for students with dependants, such as the Parents' Learning Allowance or Childcare Grant.

It is important for students to research the financial support available at their chosen universities and to apply early where necessary.

Repaying Student Loans

Repayment of Tuition Fee and Maintenance Loans begins after graduation and only when the student's income is above a set threshold.

Repayments are based on a percentage of earnings above a repayment threshold (e.g., 9% of earnings over approximately £25,000 per year — subject to change).

The amount repaid each month depends on income, not on the total amount borrowed.

Any outstanding loan balance is written off after a set period (for example, 40 years after repayments begin, depending on the specific loan terms at the time).

Student loan repayments are automatically deducted from salary through the UK tax system (PAYE).

Repayments are paused if earnings drop below the threshold.

Interest is added to the loan but is generally lower than typical commercial loan rates.



Budgeting for University

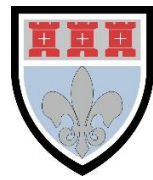
While student loans provide essential financial support, they may not always cover the full cost of living. Therefore, students are strongly encouraged to:

Plan a personal budget before starting university.

Explore part-time work opportunities that fit around study commitments.

Take advantage of student discounts and financial advice services offered by universities.

Many universities provide online budgeting tools and workshops for incoming students to help them manage their finances effectively.



After Applying

Submitting a UCAS application is a significant achievement, but it is only one stage of the journey towards starting university. Once the application is submitted, students and parent/carers should understand what to expect in the following months, including how universities respond, and the steps students must take to secure their places.

UCAS Hub and Tracking Applications

Once an application has been submitted, students can track its progress using the UCAS Hub.

Through the Hub, students can:

View updates from their chosen universities.

See when decisions are made.

Reply to offers.

It is important that students check the UCAS Hub regularly, as universities communicate decisions and any further instructions (such as interview invitations) through this platform.

Types of Offers

Universities may respond to an application with one of the following decisions:

Conditional Offer:

The student will be offered a place subject to achieving specified grades or meeting other conditions (e.g., passing an admissions test or submitting written work).

Unconditional Offer:

The student has already met the entry requirements and is guaranteed a place.

(These are rare for students yet to complete their qualifications.)

Unsuccessful:

The university has decided not to offer a place. Reasons are not usually given individually but may relate to competitiveness, academic profile, or course-specific criteria.

In some cases, universities may offer a place on a different course (a "changed course offer"). Students can choose to accept or decline such offers.

Replying to Offers

Once all universities have made their decisions (or once the final decision deadline has passed), students must reply to their offers through the UCAS Hub by a specified deadline – this is dependent on the date in which the student received their last offer – but it is much earlier in 2026 than in previous years (approximately March 2026).



Students must select:

Firm Choice:

Their first-choice university, where they most want to study.

Insurance Choice:

Their back-up choice, typically with **slightly lower entry requirements**, to secure a place if they do not meet the Firm Choice conditions.

Students must decline any other offers they hold.

It is important to make these choices carefully, considering course content, location, entry requirements, and personal preference.

UCAS Extra

UCAS Extra opens on 26 February 2026 and offers another opportunity for students who have used all five choices but are not holding any offers from universities.

Through Extra, students can:

Add an additional choice, one at a time, without needing to reapply fully.

Continue applying for courses until the end of June.

This provides a valuable second chance to secure a university place before Clearing opens.

Results Day and Confirmation

On A-Level Results Day (August 2026), students receive their examination results.

Universities automatically receive results for A-Levels and many other qualifications and will update the UCAS Hub with a confirmation decision. This normally happens at midnight of the Results Day.

Confirmed:

The student has met the conditions of their Firm Choice offer and has secured their place.

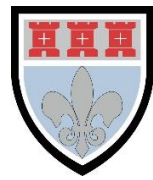
Confirmed at Insurance:

If the student does not meet the conditions of their Firm Choice but does meet the conditions of their Insurance Choice, they will be accepted there.

Clearing:

If a student does not meet the conditions of any offer, they can enter Clearing to find a place on a different course.

It is essential for students to be available on Results Day to make quick decisions if needed.



Clearing

Clearing opens in early July but is mainly used from Results Day onwards.

Students may use Clearing if:

They did not receive any offers.

They declined their offers.

They did not meet the conditions of their Firm or Insurance Choices.

Through Clearing, students can search for available courses, contact universities directly, and secure a new place.

UCAS Hub provides a Clearing search tool and advice on how to navigate the process.

The Sixth Form will help provide support and guidance if students need to use Clearing after the A-Level Results Day.

UCAS
Clearing



Gap Years and Alternatives to University

While many students progress directly from Sixth Form to university, others choose to take a different path after completing their A-Level studies. A carefully planned alternative, such as a gap year or deferral, can provide valuable personal and academic benefits.

Taking a Gap Year

A gap year is a period, typically lasting 12 months, between the end of school and the beginning of university or employment. It can be used for a wide range of constructive activities, including:

Travel:

Exploring different cultures and gaining independence and global awareness.

Work Experience:

Gaining paid employment or undertaking internships in fields related to future study or career goals.

Volunteering:

Contributing to community projects, charities, or international development work.

Skills Development:

Taking courses, learning new languages, participating in research projects, or developing creative talents.

Financial Preparation:

Earning money to support university costs or future plans.

A successful gap year is one that is structured and purposeful. Universities generally view a well-planned gap year positively, particularly when students can demonstrate that it has contributed to their personal growth, academic interests, or career development.

Advice for Students Considering a Gap Year:

Plan early: Research opportunities and organise placements or travel plans well in advance.

Set clear goals: Identify what you hope to achieve during the year.

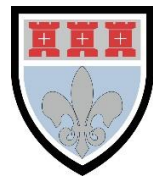
Maintain academic focus: Consider how to keep subject knowledge sharp ahead of starting a degree.

Document experiences: Keep a record of activities, skills learned, and reflections for use in future applications or interviews.

Deferring University Entry

Many universities allow students to apply for a course and then defer entry by one year.

This means the student secures their place during the UCAS application cycle but begins their studies the following academic year.



Students must indicate their wish to defer at the point of application or request it after an offer is made. Students should not leave deferral requests until A-Level Results Day.

Universities are usually supportive of deferral requests, especially if students outline their plans for the year. However, this lessens, the closer to the start of the academic year that the referral is made.

Some competitive courses (particularly Medicine or Dentistry) may not routinely permit deferrals or may impose restrictions.

It is important to check the deferral policy of each university and course before applying.

Other Alternatives to Immediate University Entry

Further Study:

Some students choose to complete an additional qualification (such as an Art Foundation course) before starting a degree.

Starting a Business:

Entrepreneurial students may choose to develop a business idea during a gap year, gaining practical skills and valuable experience.

Professional Training / Employment:

In some industries, professional certificates or technical qualifications can be pursued independently before entering higher education.



Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships

For students considering alternatives to full-time university study, apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships offer an excellent route to gaining qualifications and practical work experience simultaneously. These options allow students to enter the workforce while continuing their education at a high level.

What is an Apprenticeship?

An apprenticeship is a paid job that includes training and leads to a nationally recognised qualification.

Apprenticeships are available at different levels, including:

Advanced Apprenticeships (Level 3): Equivalent to A-Level standard.

Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4 and 5): Equivalent to a foundation degree or higher national diploma.

Degree Apprenticeships (Level 6 and 7): Equivalent to a full undergraduate or master's degree.

Apprentices split their time between working for an employer and studying, usually through a college, training provider, or university, normally for one day each working week.

What is a Degree Apprenticeship?

Degree apprenticeships combine university study with practical on-the-job training.

Students earn a full bachelor's or master's degree (without paying tuition fees) while gaining real work experience and a salary.

Tuition fees are fully funded by the employer and the government — there is no cost to the apprentice.

Apprentices are employed full-time and typically study part-time (e.g., attending university one day a week or in blocks).

The qualification awarded is identical to a traditional university degree.

Degree apprenticeships are available in a wide range of fields, including:

Engineering

Digital and Technology Solutions

Business Management

Nursing

Finance and Accounting

Law



Benefits of Apprenticeships and Degree Apprenticeships

No Tuition Fees: Students graduate without student loan debt.

Earn While You Learn: Apprentices receive a salary throughout the programme.

Practical Experience: Apprentices gain skills directly relevant to their chosen industry.

Career Progression: Apprenticeships often lead directly to permanent employment with the sponsoring company.

Competitive Advantage: Combining work experience with academic study can make candidates highly attractive to future employers.

Things to Consider

Entry Requirements:

Degree apprenticeships are highly competitive. Many require strong A-Level results, and applicants must demonstrate both academic ability and enthusiasm for the workplace.

Application Process:

Students must apply for apprenticeships separately to UCAS applications — typically by sending CVs, completing application forms, and attending interviews and assessment centres. They are typically much more challenging than university applications.

Balancing Work and Study:

Degree apprenticeships require excellent time management skills, as students must balance the demands of employment and university-level study.

Location:

Apprenticeship opportunities may require relocation, depending on where employers are based.



How Parents/Carers Can Support the Process

The UCAS application process is a significant step for students as they prepare for higher education and their future careers. While it is important that students take ownership of their applications, the support of parent/carers plays a vital role in helping them stay organised, motivated, and well-informed throughout.



Understanding the Process

Parent/carers can support students most effectively by gaining a clear understanding of the UCAS process themselves.

This includes:

Familiarising themselves with key dates and deadlines.

Understanding the structure of the application (including the new structured questions replacing the personal statement).

Being aware of university requirements such as admissions tests, interviews, and portfolio submissions where applicable.

Knowing how student finance, loans, and bursaries work.

By being well-informed, parent/carers are better placed to offer timely reminders, realistic encouragement, and reassurance when needed.

Encouraging Research and Reflection

Choosing courses and universities requires careful thought.

Parent/carers can:

Encourage students to explore a wide range of options.

Attend university open days or virtual events with them if possible.

Discuss what factors are important to the student (e.g., course content, location, university size).

Help students reflect honestly on their strengths, preferences, and long-term goals.

While offering advice is helpful, it is essential to respect that the final decision about course and university should belong to the student.



Supporting the Application Process

Practical support can make a significant difference:

Timetable Management: Help students manage their time, particularly when juggling schoolwork with UCAS tasks.

Proofreading: Offer to proofread drafts of responses to the personal statement, checking for clarity, spelling, and grammar.

Reminders: Gently remind students of key deadlines for UCAS submission, admissions tests, and student finance applications.

Organisation: Encourage students to keep records of application progress, correspondence, and important documents.

Emotional and Moral Support

The UCAS process can be a source of stress, particularly as students await decisions or prepare for interviews.

Parent/carers can:

Provide encouragement, positivity, and reassurance.

Help students manage disappointment if offers are not received or if results are not as expected.

Celebrate achievements and milestones, recognising that securing offers, attending interviews, or submitting the application are significant accomplishments in themselves.

Preparing for Results Day

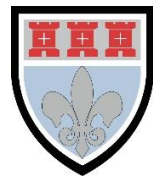
Results Day can be a challenging and emotional experience. Parent/carers can help by:

Being available and supportive on Results Day.

Encouraging a positive attitude, whether students meet their offers or need to explore Clearing.

Helping students stay flexible and open to different pathways if plans change.

Understanding the options available — such as Clearing, Gap Years, or alternative courses — can help families respond calmly and positively.



Support in the Sixth Form

At St. Mary's Sixth Form, we recognise that the UCAS process can feel overwhelming at times — both for students and their families. That's why we've put in place a comprehensive support system to guide students every step of the way, from initial research to final submission.

Here are the key ways we support our students:

Form Tutor Support

Each student has a dedicated form tutor, who plays a key role in their UCAS journey.

Tutors meet regularly with students, offering one-to-one guidance, checking progress, and helping them reflect on their course choices and personal statement drafts.

Application Reviews by Senior Staff

Before any application is submitted to UCAS, it is carefully reviewed by the Heads of Year and Mr Turnbull. This extra layer of quality control ensures each application is polished, accurate, and represents the student in the best possible light.

Bespoke UCAS Workshops

We also have specialist members of staff who run targeted UCAS workshops throughout the year.

These sessions cover everything from writing personal statements and preparing for interviews to understanding course offers and student finance.

Personal Development Time

Students also benefit from dedicated time within their Personal Development lessons to explore post-18 pathways.

This includes structured sessions on researching courses, using the UCAS Hub, and managing timelines — all built into the school curriculum.

In addition to the face-to-face support we offer, we also provide a dedicated UCAS Teams channel to ensure students have access to everything they need — anytime, anywhere.

This online space includes:

Key resources and templates to support their application.

Information videos breaking down different parts of the process.

Step-by-step guidance documents, deadline reminders, and useful links.

A place to ask questions, stay up to date, and access materials they might need outside of lesson time. This platform ensures students don't just rely on memory from sessions or printed materials — everything will be there for them to refer to, revisit, and use as they prepare their application over the coming months.



We also have a dedicated section on the St. Mary's school website focused specifically on applying for higher education.

This area of the site is:

Regularly updated with the latest guidance on the UCAS process.

A place where you can find key documents, step-by-step guides, and important dates.

Designed for both students and families to refer to throughout the year.

We encourage parents and carers to check in with this page from time to time — especially around key deadlines or if you'd like to better understand each stage of the application process.

All our students have free subscriptions to both Unifrog and Springpod — two of the most trusted and widely used platforms for post-18 planning.

Both platforms are free of charge to our students and fully supported through our school's guidance programme.

As parents and carers, encouraging your child to log in regularly and use these tools at home can be a great way to keep them on track and involved in their future planning.

In addition to the in-school support we provide, we are also proud to partner with a range of universities to offer our students expert-led workshops, seminars, and talks throughout the year.

These sessions are designed to give students direct insight from university staff, helping them to strengthen their applications and make more informed choices.

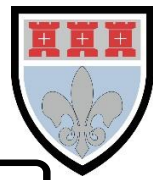
These events give students the opportunity to:

Hear from admissions tutors and university lecturers.

Ask questions directly to those who review applications.

Understand exactly what universities are looking for in personal statements and interviews.

We encourage students to attend as many sessions as possible — especially if they are considering competitive courses or universities.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)



Q1. Can students apply to both Oxford and Cambridge?

No. Students may apply to either Oxford or Cambridge, but not both, in the same UCAS cycle.

Q2. What if a student changes their mind after submitting their UCAS application?

Once submitted, course choices cannot be changed, except under very limited circumstances. However, after the initial cycle, students can apply to different courses through UCAS Extra (if eligible) or Clearing.

Q3. How many universities can a student apply to?

Students can apply to up to five courses through UCAS.

If applying for Medicine, Dentistry, or Veterinary Science, they may apply to only four courses in these subjects but may use the fifth choice for a different subject.

Q4. Can students apply to different courses at different universities?

Yes. Students can apply for a variety of courses across different universities. However, their personal statement and reference must be coherent and relevant across all choices, particularly when explaining subject motivation.

Q5. What happens if a student misses the UCAS deadline?

Applications received after the official deadlines may still be considered but are not guaranteed equal consideration. Students may also need to apply through Clearing if courses are full.

Q6. Will universities know where else a student has applied?

No. Universities cannot see the other institutions or courses that a student has applied to.

Q7. Do universities look at GCSE results?

Yes. Many universities consider GCSE grades, especially for competitive courses. Some courses have specific GCSE subject or grade requirements (e.g., minimum grades in English and Mathematics).

Q8. How important are extracurricular activities?

While academic achievement remains the primary focus, extracurricular activities are valued when they develop transferable skills (e.g., leadership, teamwork) and when they enhance subject-related interests.



Q9. Can students defer their university place?

Yes, most universities allow deferral for one year, but it must usually be requested either at the time of application or after an offer is made. Students should check individual university policies.

Q10. What is UCAS Clearing?

Clearing is a process that allows students who do not hold any offers, or who decline all their offers, to find a place at a university with available spaces after Results Day.

Q11. What if a student receives no offers?

If a student does not receive any offers from their five original choices, they can use **UCAS Extra** (from February 2026) to apply for additional courses one at a time. If no place is secured through Extra, students can enter **Clearing** in the summer to find alternative opportunities.

Q12. Can students reapply to university if they are unsuccessful?

Yes. Students who do not secure a place during the 2026 cycle can choose to reapply during the 2027 cycle. Many students use a gap year to strengthen their application by gaining additional qualifications, work experience, or super-curricular activities.

Q13. What if a student exceeds their predicted grades?

If a student significantly exceeds their predicted grades, they can explore alternative university options during **Clearing**.

Although **Adjustment** (the old formal system) has been discontinued, some universities informally accept applications from high-achieving students seeking to "upgrade" their choices.

Q14. Are international university applications different?

Yes.
Students applying to universities outside the UK (e.g., in the USA, Canada, Europe) will usually need to apply separately from UCAS and meet different entry requirements and deadlines. Specialist advice is available from the Sixth Form team for those considering international applications.

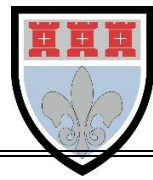
Q15. Can students accept more than one offer?

No.
Students must firmly accept **one** university offer (Firm Choice) and may hold **one** back-up offer (Insurance Choice). They must decline all other offers.
Accepting two offers formally secures places at two universities, but students will ultimately attend only one.



Glossary

Term	Definition
UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service)	The central organisation through which applications to UK universities and colleges are managed.
UCAS Hub	The online portal where students complete applications, track offers and manage responses.
Conditional Offer	An offer of a university place dependent on achieving specified examination results or other conditions.
Unconditional Offer	A guaranteed offer of a university place, not dependent on any further academic results.
Firm Choice	The student's preferred university offer, which they commit to as their first choice.
Insurance Choice	A back-up university offer, typically with lower entry requirements, in case the conditions of the Firm Choice are not met.
Clearing	A UCAS process that matches unplaced students with available university courses after Results Day.
Predicted Grades	Grades that the Sixth Form estimate a student is likely to achieve based on performance to date.
Reference	A confidential statement written by the Sixth Form endorsing a student's UCAS application.
Super-Curricular Activities	Academic activities beyond standard schoolwork that demonstrate deeper engagement with a subject, such as extra reading, online courses, or research projects.
Gap Year	A year taken between the end of school and the start of university, often used for work, travel, volunteering, or skills development.
Deferral	Postponing the start of a university course by one academic year, either requested during application or after receiving an offer.
UCAS Extra	An opportunity for students who used all five choices but hold no offers to add additional course choices one at a time.
Admissions Test	A test required by some universities for particular courses (e.g., UCAT, LNAT) to assess aptitude and subject knowledge.



Term	Definition
Degree Apprenticeship	A structured programme combining full-time employment with university study, leading to a bachelor's or master's degree, with no tuition fees for the student.
Personal Statement	The new UCAS application format for 2026 entry, where students answer specific questions about their motivation, preparation, and experiences instead of writing a single personal statement.
Clearing Plus	A service that suggests personalised course matches to students who are eligible for Clearing, based on their UCAS application and preferences.
Student Loans Company (SLC)	The government organisation responsible for providing tuition fee loans, maintenance loans, and other financial support to students.
Contextual Offer	A university offer that takes into account the applicant's background or educational circumstances, potentially lowering the required grades.
Widening Participation	Initiatives aimed at increasing access to higher education for under-represented groups, often through outreach programmes and contextual admissions.
Personal ID	A unique 10-digit number assigned to each UCAS applicant, used for identification throughout the application process.