



The Global Classroom



Thinking Futures

Higher Education in the US and UK



This resource is designed to support your research, and you should always check specific information with individual universities.

Discover. Develop. Succeed.



Higher Education in the US and the UK

More than half of the world's top 200 universities are in the US or the UK. While both countries offer outstanding opportunities, each system approaches higher education differently. There are advantages to each, and some key aspects to consider when deciding which system might be best for you.

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The first difference is the use of language in the two sectors. In the UK, institutions of higher education are almost always referred to as universities, whereas the US uses a range of terms: 'college' is often used interchangeably with 'university' and 'school'. Separately, in both systems, a college can refer to an academic division of a university (such as College of Business) and in the UK, colleges are sometimes halls of residence. There are helpful lists of common terms and definitions for both systems available - [US](#) and the [UK](#).

The length of undergraduate degree study is the most obvious distinction between the two systems. In the US, undergraduate degrees typically last four years, while in the UK the same degree is usually completed in three. Similarly, because undergraduate programmes are often less focused, students in the US have to attend graduate school for much longer. For example, to gain a law degree in the US, an additional three years of law school (after four years of undergraduate studies) is usually required, whereas in the UK you may only need one additional year.

Degrees are typically structured differently. In the US, undergraduate education is typically seen as a time for broad learning. Normally (and certainly for liberal arts schools) students are expected to attend general classes as part of their degrees. In the UK, education is much more focused on a specific subject of study. There are typically fewer opportunities to explore areas outside your degree, but this does mean you can focus in your chosen area.

Another distinction is the way in which assignments are set and assessed. The US undergraduate system promotes breadth, and courses typically require weekly assignments such as writing projects, research papers, and presentations. In the UK, most universities are much more lecture-based, with only occasional assignments and more focus on independent study based on a reading list (though this varies by whether the subject is arts, social sciences, or science). In some cases in the UK, a module may have no formally assessed assignments and instead your entire grade may be based on one final exam. In the US, your grade is usually based on your performance in a variety of assignments, with the final examination contributing to only a portion of your total grade.



Campus life is likely to differ, though it is difficult to make generalisations and this will vary between institutions. You can typically expect more impressive facilities at US universities, especially when it comes to sport (usually available at no cost, so you have no excuse for not keeping fit!). There is usually more 'school spirit' on US campuses, typically focused around sports teams. If you would like to explore this more, there are many websites that discuss the differences in culture between the UK and the US, including from the [Fulbright Commission](#) that supports exchange between the two places.

Students in the UK and the US can expect to be provided with accommodation on campus in their first year of study. There are many similarities in the arrangements, although in the UK it is usual to have a bedroom to yourself, whereas in the US you are much more likely to share a bedroom with at least one other person. It is also more common for student residences to be self-catered in the UK, while the US normally provides a range of dining options for students. In both systems, students typically have additional housing options available to them after their first year including private rented accommodation.

Term dates usually vary between the two systems. In the US, the academic year typically begins in August, and finishes in early May. The majority of US universities have two semesters, with one large break in between. In the UK, the university year usually begins later (at the end of September or early October). Most universities have three terms, with sizable breaks between each, and the academic year usually ends in June.

The cost of an education in the US is generally higher compared to the UK, and much higher at some universities. Universities in the UK can charge up to £9,000 (approximately \$14,300) per year to residents of the UK and the EU, though fees for international students are usually higher. At the time of writing, the average tuition fee in the US for public two-year institutions is around \$3,000 per year, while the average fee for private four-year institutions is around \$29,000 per year. Some private, four-year institutions can cost up to \$50,000 per year. Make sure you check with individual universities about their tuition fees and living costs, and the financial support that may be available to you.

An important difference between the US and UK is the application process. Students applying to US undergraduate programmes submit applications directly to individual universities, whereas in the UK all applications are processed centrally by the University and Colleges Admissions Service ([UCAS](#)). In the US, the [Common Application](#) is used by approximately 400 universities that all use the same application process. However, most institutions require accompanying essays written for their university, and each university sets its own application deadlines and fees, as well as admissions requirements.

In the US, your application will typically be considered by colleagues in the admissions office, rather than academic members of staff - keep this audience in mind when preparing your application. In the UK, it's typical for your application to be considered by academic staff, though this varies at each university and you could ask each institution who will be reading your application.

If you are thinking about applying to university in the UK or the US, there are Thinking Futures resources to support you.