A guide to studying at the University of Birmingham for international students

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As an international student at the University of Birmingham, you may be based on our Birmingham campus, or on one of our campuses abroad. Being a new student at a British university, you may need time to understand and adjust to your new educational environment. This guide aims to help you speed up that process.
WHAT ARE THE COMMON PRINCIPLES OF THE UK STUDY SYSTEM?

There are different levels of degrees. Students who study for a first degree are called undergraduate students (as they have not graduated yet); those studying for a qualification at a higher level are called postgraduate students (as they have already graduated after taking their first degree). A first degree is typically called a Bachelors (and may include Honours), while higher-level degrees are known as Masters and Doctorates.

FIRST DEGREES

At British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) the most common type of first degree is called a Bachelor with Honours, which is a programme that takes three years of full-time study. It can take four years for example for languages, or for programmes that include work experience or studying abroad. Usually, there is one subject area (eg, Law), but there are also combined programmes (eg, Law with Languages). You might study for a BA (Bachelor of Arts), BSc (Bachelor of Science), or a BEd (Bachelor of Education).

ADMISSIONS

The admission requirements for first degrees vary, but there is a standardised points system to allow comparison between qualifications, called the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) tariff. Some courses also have an entry test and many require interviews. Students have to pay yearly fees. International students need to demonstrate their educational and language abilities (eg, through an IELTS test result), but as a student who has been accepted for study at the University of Birmingham you will already know this.

STRUCTURE

As it is important that the same degree has a similar level of difficulty and value in different HEIs, the amount of learning required for this type of programme is usually described in terms of ‘credits’. Generally, there is one credit per ten expected hours of effective learning, and there are 120 credits per year (so 360 in total).

Students normally have to study a number of ‘modules’, which are separately structured and assessed units of study that make up a course (eg, six modules that are worth 20 credits each in a year). Some of these are ‘core’ modules, ie, they are compulsory, and some can be chosen from a list each year, ie, they are ‘optional’. Although universities can decide the content of these modules, there is a national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that describes what students need to be able to do for any subject at honours degree level, and which also provides guidance about assessment.
TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Some universities divide the academic year into three (or more) terms of teaching and assessment; others work with semesters, i.e., two parts. The academic year normally starts at the end of September.

Teaching methods are decided by universities and the individual teachers. Most universities use combinations of large lectures, lab work (e.g., for science subjects) and seminars. Mostly, the seminars comprise small group work to increase understanding of what has been covered in the lectures. Often students are asked to prepare for them, by reading articles, for example, and are expected to take an active part in the seminar discussions.

In the past, international students at UK HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) have had to travel to their campus (the grounds and buildings of a university) to study. Many HEIs now have campuses abroad or run programmes via distance learning. Blended learning is also very common, which means that learning is done in a variety of ways, not just face-to-face, by using technology enhanced learning.

Assessment is done in different ways, e.g., practical lab work or oral examinations, but in the UK it is mostly carried out through written tasks, for example, by answering questions under timed conditions or by submitting assignments (such as essays) by a deadline. Universities decide on their own assessment methods for their different courses, and what the rules are regarding resits or resubmissions. The module lecturers tend to be the people marking the assessment, but often there is also second marking. To make sure that assessment is fair, universities use external examiners: people who check candidates’ marks, make sure that standards between universities are similar, and that the assessment process is fair.

TIP

People who teach on a module can have different job titles. Some are employed by the university as a ‘lecturer’, ‘senior lecturer’ or ‘professor’. Others work on temporary contracts, e.g., as a ‘teaching fellow’. In some languages, ‘professor’ is another word for ‘teacher’. In the British university system this is not the case: ‘professor’ is a title, showing that the person has achieved the highest academic rank, so do not use the title for all your lecturers. You will find that most of your lecturers want you to use their first names, or sometimes their surnames. They will introduce themselves with the name they want you to use, so pay attention to this.

The following are examples of some words and phrases you may hear and use to talk about assessment:

- **A candidate**: a person taking an examination.
- **A mark**: this can relate to one point for a correct answer, but often refers to the total number of marks received for a particular assessment (e.g., 104/150).
- **A marking scheme**: detailed information that shows how marks can be earned, and how many a candidate can earn for aspects of their work.
- **A grade**: this is an overall assessment result that allows you to compare yourself to others, expressed as a percentage (e.g., 56), a letter (e.g., a B), or another system (e.g., a 2:1).
- **An assignment**: the work you have to produce to receive credits, e.g., an essay, experiment or report.
- **Coursework**: all your assignments, e.g., reflective writing, data interpretation and calculations, essays, reports, dissertations, theses, portfolios, projects, or presentations.
- **A submission date**: the deadline by which you have to hand in or deliver your coursework.
- **Turnitin**: the software that is used at most British institutions to check for plagiarism.
- **To progress**: to go on to the next year (because of achieving good enough results).
- **To resit**: to sit an exam again (e.g., after failing it or missing it the first time); there are rules about resits.
- **To resubmit**: to submit (hand in) an assignment again; there are rules about resubmissions.
- **A capped mark**: it is possible that the rules about resits or resubmissions state that the results for your second attempt will be set at a maximum, even if you actually do better.
- **Extenuating circumstances**: these are unexpected problems that can affect how well you do, e.g., illness. You need to follow a procedure (usually started by filling in a form) so that you can have an extension (a later deadline) for written work or a resit for an exam.
- **A degree congregation**: a graduation ceremony, a gathering and celebration at the end of your degree.
ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are expected to undertake their assessments with academic integrity, that is, they have to behave in an honest way. Academic misconduct happens when students cheat in their exams or plagiarise in their coursework. Some examples of plagiarism are claiming work as your own that was done by someone else, not mentioning a source (e.g., a book or article) you used in an assignment, or submitting the same work for different modules or courses. Accidental plagiarism can happen when you are not sure what is expected in the British university system, but it is up to you to find out and to follow the rules. For example, if you do not say in your writing where an idea has come from, you are saying that it is your own. This is why you have to make sure that you are clear about your sources.

To avoid plagiarism in written assignments, work has to be submitted using software that can detect whether similar text has been submitted elsewhere, for example, by a student at a different university. Depending on how serious the plagiarism is, students can be allowed to resubmit but will receive a capped mark, they may fail a module or a programme, or they may even be told to leave the university.

If you study hard and regularly, you will not be tempted to plagiarise. If you know how and when you are expected to acknowledge sources in your work, you will be able to avoid accidental plagiarism too. Your lecturers will give you advice and information about plagiarism and will help you to avoid it.

LANGUAGE POINT

In British English, it is common to use abbreviations. You may hear people talk about:

- **VLE**: this refers to a Virtual Learning Environment; i.e., a web-based platform to enable learning. The University’s is called Canvas.
- **MEQs**: this refers to Module Evaluation Questionnaires. You may get these during and at the end of your module. The questionnaires ask for your anonymous feedback on things like content, structure, delivery and workload.

Don’t be afraid to ask what an abbreviation stands for – people can forget that they are using them.
DEGREE OUTCOMES

Usually, the possible degree outcomes at the end of the three years, from best to worst, are:

- **First class degree**: known as ‘a first’, you would normally require over 70% to achieve this mark
- **Second class degree (with two separate distinctions)**:
  - an ‘upper second’, known as ‘a 2:1’ (pronounced ‘two one’);
    requires a pass mark of over 60%
  - a ‘lower second’, known as ‘a 2:2’ (pronounced ‘two two’);
    requires a pass mark over 50%
- **Third class degree**: known as ‘a third’; you have achieved 40%+
- **Pass**: the candidate did not achieve the level of an ‘honours’ degree; this category is not always available
- **Fail**

Remember that different countries regard certain outcomes in certain ways. For example, in some educational systems, it is quite common for students to achieve 90%, whereas in others this is nearly impossible!

There is a logical reason for this: if you consider what you expect students to know as 100%, then 90% should be possible to achieve. If you consider all possible knowledge to be 100%, and if you assume that even experts like professors would not know everything, then 90% is not something you would expect a student to be able to get. It does depend on the course or module too; some scientific subjects (eg, Maths) have answers that are either correct or incorrect, and so it is possible to score higher on those than on subjects that are open to interpretation (such as Literature).

Generally speaking, in Britain, students do not achieve 90%. The pass mark for a module is normally set at 40%. If you are not used to this, then you should change how you think about your results and not think you have failed if you have between 40% and 50%. Of course, achieving over 50% or 60% (often called a ‘merit’), or over 70% (often called a ‘distinction’) is better!

Always read the feedback on your assignments, so that you can keep improving.
HIGHER LEVEL DEGREES

After achieving a first degree, some students go on to take a higher-level qualification:

1. **Masters degrees** usually last a year full time. Depending on your subject area, you could be studying for an MA (Master of Arts, usually in arts, social sciences, business or humanities subjects), an MSc (Master of Science), or MBA (Master of Business Administration). You usually need to have a good degree (typically a 2:1 type – see ‘Teaching and assessment’ section) and sometimes work experience before you can start.

   Taught Masters degrees usually comprise taught (and assessed) modules as well as a dissertation, worth 180 credits altogether. Usually, achieving 50% leads to a Pass mark, 60% to a Merit, and 70% to a Distinction. Degrees by research, eg, MRes or MPhil (Masters in Philosophy), do not include any teaching and are usually just awarded a Pass or Fail mark.

2. **Doctoral degrees**, also known as doctorates (usually lasting three to four years full time, and double that part time) are the highest-level qualifications. Examples are Doctor of Philosophy (PhD or DPhil), Engineering Doctorate (EngD or DEng), Doctor of Education (EdD), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). You normally need a Masters degree to start; some students start with that and then transfer to the higher level qualification.

TIP

As there are many different institutions, degrees and educational systems, words can have different meanings. First degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, for example, are traditionally called Bachelors, but they are much longer than three years and lead to Masters-level qualifications.
WHAT IS IT LIKE TO STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM?

THE UNIVERSITY’S ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The University of Birmingham is a global university at the heart of an ambitious city.

It was founded in 1900 by Joseph Chamberlain, who was a British manufacturer, politician and mayor of Birmingham. It was the UK’s first red-brick university, representing a new model for higher education: as a civic university it accepted men and women from all religions and backgrounds equally.

The University generates over £3.5 billion to the economy; employs over 15,000 people; has over 34,000 students; more than 100,000 online learners; 4,000 international students; and 300,000 alumni (former students) across the globe. It represents a community of 150 nationalities and considers its diversity a source of strength. It has an international presence: apart from its main base on the Edgbaston campus, teaching happens in China and Singapore and Dubai. The Birmingham campus has the tallest freestanding clock tower in the world, named after Joseph Chamberlain, and commonly referred to as ‘Old Joe’.

SUPPORT AT THE UNIVERSITY

There is lots of support available at the University of Birmingham. Some services cover academic support, others personal and emotional issues that may arise while you are a student. You are given information about this when you start as a student.

THE UNIVERSITY’S ETHOS

The University values critical enquiry, debate and self-motivation. It works on the principles of enquiry-based and research-intensive learning, which means that lecturers and students work together to investigate issues in their fields, eg, through fieldwork, projects, investigations into real-world issues, and problem-based learning.

The University of Birmingham encourages its students to develop reasoning and critical thinking skills, to manage and reflect on their own learning, to communicate effectively with people from different perspectives and backgrounds, to share their knowledge, to prepare for future careers, and to enjoy learning.

TIP

Don’t feel embarrassed about asking for help. Universities understand that life does not always go as expected and that all of us will need some help from others at some point. They are very happy to give this help, and have done so for many students, but need to know when things go wrong as soon as possible. Take advantage of the services available, for example, you may have a personal tutor and a welfare tutor in your department. Do not hesitate to talk to them; they are here to help.
INTERACTIONS WITH STAFF MEMBERS AT THE UNIVERSITY

You may find that in your culture, things happen in different ways than in the UK (see our BIA guide: ‘Working effectively across cultures’).

BEHAVIOUR IN LECTURES

An hour of teaching is actually only 50 minutes long. This means you have time to go to your next lecture and start every lecture on time. The lecturer will state if it is fine for you to ask questions at any point or whether there will be time to do so at the end. You would not normally interrupt the lecturer but take notes. You may have been given lecture slides beforehand. If the group is asked a question, it is polite to raise your hand before answering. It is fine to answer if you are not 100% sure you are right; although nobody likes to be wrong, it is accepted that we all make mistakes and that they can be useful to check learning and to build on existing knowledge.

The total number of teaching hours varies between programmes. You may find you have fewer hours of lectures than you are used to in your own country; this is because you are supposed to use your other time to process knowledge, read, prepare for lectures and seminars, work on your assignments, and use your own initiative to build on your existing knowledge. This requires skills such as self-motivation and time management.

SPEAKING TO LECTURERS IN PERSON

In British academia, lecturers have office hours. That means they have certain hours in which they are available for student to drop in. They may be prepared to talk to students at other times, eg, after lectures, but they may have other commitments and may not always be able to do so. You can also try to make appointments.

CONTACTING LECTURERS BY EMAIL

Lecturers may contact you by email, or they may send messages to you or your cohort (a group of students who start a course at the same time) via Canvas, the Virtual Learning Environment.

It is generally fine to email lecturers with queries or to make an appointment but there are some guidelines you should follow:

- Only contact the lecturer if you cannot find the information elsewhere: you may have a module handbook or online access to the information you are looking for
- Respect that lecturers are busy people and although you are important to them, they may need to prioritise other students and issues, so do not expect a quick reply
- Do not expect any replies outside of working hours (9.00am–5.00pm, Monday to Friday)
- When you receive an email from a lecturer, do reply, even if it is just to say thank you
- Be polite and follow email conventions (see ‘language point’)
- Use spellchecking software so that you are using correct grammar and spelling; it is a sign of respect
- If you do not receive a reply after several days, it is fine to send a gentle and polite reminder
It is important to follow email conventions in order to come across as polite.

If your lecturers have introduced themselves with their first names, then you can use them. Otherwise, use their title and surname (which you can normally find in their staff profiles on the University’s website):

- Hi there
- Dearest
- I am sending my assignment
- I want to change tutor groups
- I don’t know what to do about…

Use polite language; don’t be too direct:

- Dear Susan
- Dear Professor Watson
- Dear Doctor Holmes
- I was wondering if it would be possible to change my seminar group
- As previously discussed, I am not sure how I should…

Finish your email:

- That’s it for now.
- See you in the lecture!

Here are some examples of acceptable and unacceptable emails:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>×</th>
<th>✓</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi there</td>
<td>Dear Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>I don’t know what to do about…</td>
<td>As previously discussed, I am not sure how I should…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>×</th>
<th>✓</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject line: [empty]</td>
<td>Subject line: Group 2 proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>Dear Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attchd</td>
<td>As requested, please find attached the assignment done by Group 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject line: Re: OOOOOOPS, now attached!!</td>
<td>Best wishes, [your name]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singh</td>
<td>Dear Doctor Singh,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slides don’t work. PLEASE HELP.</td>
<td>I am one of your students on Module FT112. I have not been able to download next week’s slides on Canvas. I think the link may be broken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there any other way I can access them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kind regards, [your name]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make sure you check what you have written: have you been clear about your topic, have you given enough information, have you kept the message to the point, have you proofread it? Did you use a formal style eg, without capitalisation or exclamation marks?
This guide aimed to give you a better idea of what to expect at the University of Birmingham. Do continue to ask questions to your personal tutor. We wish you every success in your studies!
REFERENCES

All dictionary definitions taken from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com

IMAGE CREDIT

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