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This guide has been created to help explain some of the terminology that you may come across whilst at university. It is aimed at new students who are about to start studying at university, although much of the content will be helpful to students throughout their university journeys as well as to students at other types of higher education provider. Sometimes academics and professional services staff can forget that much of this terminology will be new to students and assume that you will automatically know what they're talking about when they refer to things like office hours, learning outcomes, modules or different kinds of assessment.

At the start of your university journey, it can be difficult to ask questions face to face about the language of higher education and what particular terms mean, the roles of different university staff, how teaching, learning and assessment work, and what your own responsibilities are as a student.

In this guide, we've tried to anticipate the questions you might have as you start to navigate university life and familiarise yourself with the different principles, structures and processes. Designed in consultation with the academic community (see Appendix), it is, effectively, a glossary which you can use to help you understand the different expressions you are likely to encounter and enable you to settle into life at your new institution.

We have organised this guide into six sections:

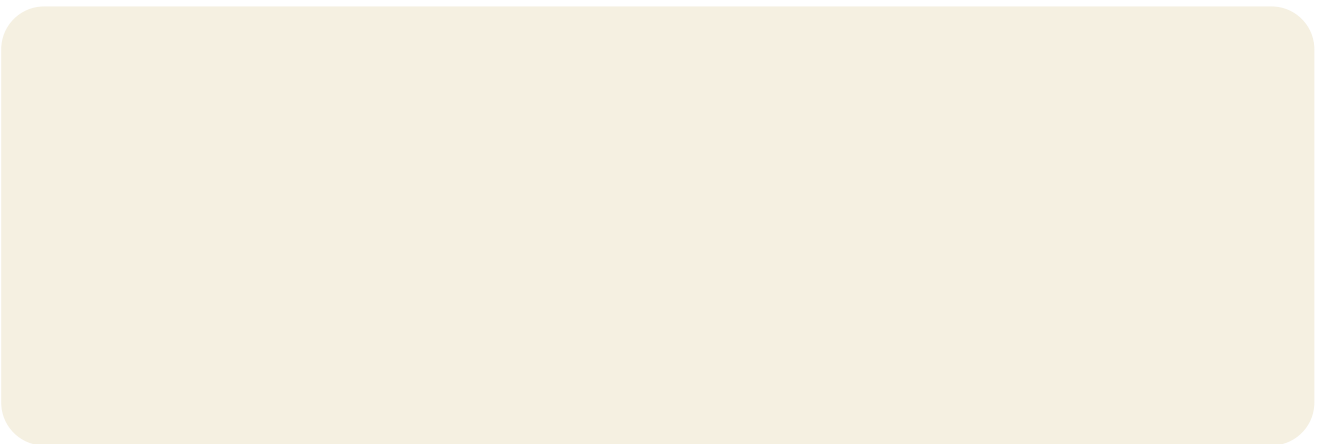


We recommend that you read through it before you start university but come also back to it during your first week and throughout your first semester as needed. Please note, some terms may be used in slightly different ways, depending on your course and your university, but we have tried to identify things that are common across all universities. For example, we have used 'school' and 'department' to refer to the organisational unit that delivers your teaching, but it might also be referred to as a 'college' or 'institute' in your university. We hope this document will give you information to start you off on your exciting learning journey.

This resource was commissioned by QAA Membership and produced by Dr Pam Birtill, Dr Richard Harris and Madeleine Pownall at the University of Leeds.

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Each course will have some students who are elected by their fellow students to represent their concerns. They are often referred to as student representatives, but this will vary across universities. Different universities and departments will have different types of student representatives. For example, you may have student representatives that act on behalf of the whole course, or you could have representatives for each year group. If you have concerns or positive feedback about your course, you can talk to your student representative who will raise this in the appropriate forum.<sup>9</sup> (esen)

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If you are studying a science or practice-based subject, demonstrators will often help you with the practical components of the course. Demonstrators typically have a degree (or equivalent experience) in the relevant subject and can often be studying for a higher degree, such as a [PhD](#). They will assist you in using equipment and may give advice on writing assignments.



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Professors are the highest rank of academic staff in a university. In the UK, around one in 10 academics is a professor. In the UK, being appointed to a professorship is part of a promotion procedure, and staff will need to meet certain criteria relating to their role. There are also named professors, who are given 'a chair' normally named after an individual who has made significant achievements or named after the funder of the professorship. These are particularly prestigious. Professors who have retired but are continuing to contribute to the work of the university have the title Professor Emeritus/a.

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Each department or school will have a Head of School/Department who is responsible for the overall management. Also, most schools or departments will have a role such as a Director of Teaching and Learning or another title (such as Head of Teaching, Director of Student Education, Programme Director). This person is responsible for the teaching and learning provision in the school and oversees quality assurance of teaching in the school. In most universities, a school will be part of a faculty or college (a faculty is a collection of schools that share related interests). A Pro Dean is responsible for the management and strategy of the faculty.



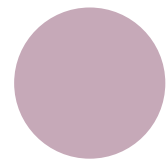
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Student mental health is important to universities and there are a variety of support systems in place. If your mental health has a substantial long-term negative impact on your ability to do normal daily activities, you should seek support from your university's Disability Services. It is also advisable to register with a local GP near your university and/or accommodation and use them or the wider NHS for mental health treatment as required.



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The university's Academic Language Centre will provide support to students for whom English is not their first language. They will provide pre-university programmes to prepare students to study in English, administer exams to assess students' English proficiency, and provide support to students. They will also provide teaching of other languages, often including British Sign Language, for both staff and students.





# 4:

A discrete 'chunk' or unit of learning with its own learning outcomes and, usually, its own [assessment](#). Most, but not all, courses in the UK are modularised. Where courses are modular, they can comprise different modules which may vary in size. The size of modules is described as a number of [credits](#).

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University modules are organised into 'credits' at most universities. This is a system for calculating how each of your modules is weighted, that is, how much they contribute to your overall grade. On full-time courses, you usually study 120 credits in each year with an undergraduate honours degree usually composing of 360 credits in total. Each credit requires a notional 10 hours of study effort, which is divided between direct contact with teaching staff,

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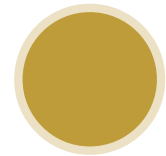
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Depending on your course, you will have teaching sessions that are not lectures. Small group teaching sessions may be called tutorials, supervision or seminars. This will vary by context, but you will usually be required to prepare some work in advance, and be given the opportunity to discuss course material more closely with other students and a teacher.



While lectures and seminars are the two most commonly known examples of teaching and learning at university level, it's important to recognise that there are many different and effective ways of teaching and learning in higher education; particularly among practice-based courses. Examples include laboratory-based demonstration and assessment in the sciences, studio work, production and performance in the creative arts, field trips and working and/or studying abroad as part of the study of modern languages.





## 5: Assess

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In universities, assessments are set and marked by the people who teach you. There will be an internal process of moderation, when another member of staff, usually in the same department, will read a sample of the assessments and make sure that they agree with the grades awarded. Grades will remain provisional until the external examiner, who is an academic from a different university, also views students' work and grades. The external examiner's role is to ensure that the marking process is fair and that the marking is to a consistent standard across a cohort, and broadly aligned with how the subject is assessed in other universities. The external examiner does not alter individual student grades.



Feedback is provided on your work by academic staff who mark it. Feedback is usually provided in the form of a mark or grade, and written comments. It is important to remember that feedback is intended to be objective and constructive, supporting you to achieve your ambitions as a student. It should help you to improve your work for future assignments.

You don't have to use your feedback immediately. When you receive feedback, think honestly about how you approached the work, what worked well and what you might like to do differently next time. Remember to revisit your feedback before you start a new piece of work. Write an action plan that records what you will do differently next time.

Feedback should help you to improve, but you need to engage with it honestly. If you don't understand your feedback or you need help to know what you need to do differently, contact the academic who marked the work and ask to discuss it, and for help in improving your results next time. This would be the sort of thing you might use the academic's [office hours](#) for.



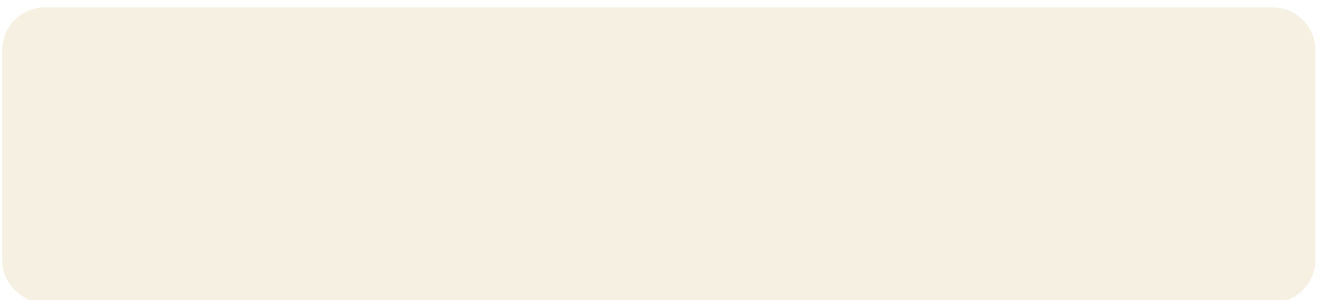
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University marking scales vary. Many universities use categorical marking schemes - where your work will be assigned a number. This is simply a way of being able to combine your attainment across modules. So if you get 58, that doesn't mean you have got four things wrong compared to a 62. Instead, these numbers relate to different standards/criteria. In other words, work that is graded a 62 is a different standard to that of a 58. These numbers relate to different award classifications (see [grade boundaries](#)). Some universities use alphanumeric marking or schemes using numbers up to 20 or 21. Your tutors will be able to explain the marking scheme in use including how it relates to your final degree classification.



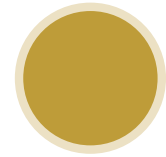
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In the UK, undergraduate degrees are classified - when you complete your whole award, you don't just get a grade (for example, 65), you also get given a classification. The best classification is a First - this is usually for work that is exceptionally good, and has a grade of over 70. The next classification is a 2.1 (two-one). This is the top half of a second class degree, and usually applies to work that has a grade of 60-70. The next classification is a 2.2 (two-two).

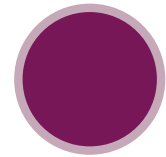


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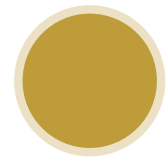
When academics design a module, they will decide what they want you to learn, know or be able to do as a result of studying the module. This will be described by the learning outcomes. In order to check that you have achieved the learning outcomes, you will be assessed, and your assessment should directly relate to the learning outcomes of the module.



Referencing is an important part of academic writing practice. It is the way by which you let the reader of your work know where your ideas have come from and/or the authors who have influenced your thinking. The precise details of referencing vary across subjects and across universities. You should make sure that you are using the correct format for your work. Checking the required format for your referencing is a useful skill.



TurnItIn is software which is used by most universities to check for [plagiarism](#) in submitted work. It checks your work against published books, websites, and other people's work (both within your university and at other universities). It produces a 'similarity score', which shows how similar your work is to other writing. When the marker reads your written assessment, they will examine the report from TurnItIn, and if there are large parts of the work that are the same as other work, you may be investigated for plagiarism. You should check with your own university about their policies for checking work, as these will vary.



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This is where a student uses other people's work and presents it as their own. Universities often use software to detect plagiarism, where your work is compared to other students' work and with pages on the internet. Plagiarism is a serious offence that can result in students being expelled from university.



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Academic misconduct is a growing problem in higher education. It takes a wide variety of forms including the use of essay and degree mills, plagiarism, collusion between students, and forged or altered qualification certificates. You can find out more about what academic integrity is, what the consequences of academic misconduct can be, and the different kinds of support available to you in this [explainer video](#).



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In-class learning, such as time spent in [seminars](#) or [lectures](#), is only part of the learning that you will do at university. You will also have to undertake lots of independent study. The type of independent work that you will need to do will differ during the semester but might involve [note taking](#), [reading](#), completing coursework or preparing for exams. It might help to think of studying as a bit like a full-time job in that you should spend about 40 hours a week completing work. You can ask your [personal tutor](#) for guidance about how best to spend your





Overall, your degree will be a fun and inspiring learning experience. But sometimes learning will feel difficult and you are not necessarily going to enjoy every aspect of your degree. That's okay and is a completely normal part of the learning process. Learning has a complex relationship with emotion. Sometimes the parts of your course which you find most difficult can also be the most rewarding and you will feel very proud to have succeeded. Learning is a skill that you can practice and get better at. It's also a skill for life, which can help you in your future career and wider activities.



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The Student Guide to the Hidden Curriculum was first published by QAA in October 2021, after which the authors conducted an evaluation of the resource with undergraduate students (N = 109) and academic staff (N = 32). In response to student and staff feedback, the guide has been refined and updated to offer this Expanded Edition in 2022.

This resource is part of QAA's **SSS** project, which offers positive approaches and practical solutions to help support a range of transitions. QAA Members can access further resources from this project including toolkits, short papers, presentations and case studies on our [Membership Resources Site](#).

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