If your son or daughter is on a ‘vocational’ (work-related) course at college e.g. BTEC National Diploma or Advanced Diploma they could be thinking about applying for higher education. If so, you will have some questions about it all. This guide will provide you with some of the information you will need to help your son or daughter along the way.

There are probably six main questions:

- What is higher education?
- Why bother to do it?
- Is it the right choice for my son/daughter?
- What qualifications do you need for HE?
- How do you apply?
- How much does it cost?

Everyone’s circumstances are different so this just provides a starting point - there is a list of additional sources of information at the end of this guide.
Higher Education

Higher education is the next step up from the further education course your son or daughter is on at the moment. It involves more challenging qualifications such as first degrees, higher national diplomas and foundation degrees. Most higher education courses are taught at universities, but there are some that take place at higher education colleges, specialist colleges and some local FE colleges.

Higher Education – why bother to do it?

Employers always need staff with higher levels of qualification. This is especially true now that the competition from other parts of the world is fierce. These are valuable qualifications that improve long-term career prospects. Government figures show that graduates (people who leave university with a degree) can earn £100,000 more than a non-graduate over their working life-time.

Higher education also develops important skills such as a working knowledge of information technology or the ability to communicate well; both held in high regard by potential employers.

Research also shows that graduates are more satisfied with their jobs, have better health prospects and fewer instances of divorce!

However, graduates are new to the labour market, so it often takes 6-12 months to find the job that will give them those precious career opportunities. Career opportunities often depend on which course you chose to do in the first place. It is good advice to find out what happened in the past to graduates from the course your son/daughter wants to do. University Careers Centres are a source of information on the destinations of their students.

Higher Education – is it right for my child?

More people than ever are going into higher education. There are courses to suit everyone, regardless of their background and preferred method of study. Higher education is an option as long as your son or daughter is motivated to learn and to achieve. People often think that university is aimed at A level students. This is no longer the case. Whatever kind of level 3 course your child is taking there are progression routes into higher education.

There are three key decisions to be made to make sure that your son/daughter is happy in their chosen course:

- The right course (based on learning styles, the course format and career aspirations)
- Whether to learn part-time of full-time
- Where to study

What courses are available?

There are more than 50,000 degree courses on offer so it’s really important that your son/daughter takes the time to research their ideas and choose a course that suits them.

There are four main types of course to choose from

**Degree courses (often called first degrees)** are available in many vocational and academic subjects. They normally take 3 years to complete. There are some exceptions, such as medicine and architecture, that take longer. A degree is often the basic requirement for professional jobs. Degrees can be taken full-time or part-time.

**Higher National Diplomas or Higher National Certificates** are available in a wide range of vocational areas and normally take 2 years to complete. They combine theory with practice and prepare students for work in that vocational area. They can be taken full-time or part-time. In some cases, students can transfer from an HND/HNC onto a degree course.

**Sandwich courses** are degree and HND/HNC courses with a different format. Students spend time working for a company as part of their course. There are ‘thick sandwiches’ where they spend a year with a company and ‘thin sandwiches’ where they spend two blocks of six months with a company. Sandwich type courses are mostly vocational courses.

**Foundation degrees** are a new development designed with employers to help them to up-skill the workforce. They are available in a wide variety of vocational subjects. They take two years to complete full-time and longer part-time. Many are delivered through the workplace. Graduates can go on to complete a first degree.

**Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)** are equivalent to the first 2 years of a degree course. They are not offered in the full range of degree courses. However, students can continue studying and convert them into a degree level qualification.
Full-time or Part-time?

Students have individual circumstances and these affect how they study. Many courses are taken full-time, over three or four years, but there are also courses that are offered on a part-time basis - so you can earn while you learn. Another method is through The Open University, which offers the chance to take qualifications through distance learning. Some employers offer the opportunity to have day-release to get qualifications they want like an HNC. Other employers use the NVQ framework where employees get technical and supervisory qualifications as they work.

Where to study?

There are higher education institutions across the whole of the UK. About half of Tameside’s students choose to stay local as there are five universities in the immediate area. The other half move away from home to study. There are city based universities, universities in small towns and universities that have their own campus (located on their own area of land). Students need to know what lifestyle they want in order to have a happy experience while they study.

Higher Education – what qualifications do you need?

It is essential for your son/daughter to find out the specific entry requirements for each course before they apply. This will give them a better chance of success.

All higher education courses have entry requirements. These are the qualifications needed to get onto the course. These vary enormously between courses and universities depending upon factors such as how popular the course is and where it is being offered. There are two levels of entry requirements an applicant has to meet:

1. The ‘minimum entry requirements’ for higher education are 5 GCSEs (or their equivalent) at grades A-C with a BTEC National Diploma or 2 A levels or an Advanced Diploma. Without these they cannot be accepted unless they are a mature student.

2. The ‘course requirements’ are more specific and can be higher than the minimum entry requirements. For example, the course requirements could be for a BTEC National Diploma in a specific subject at distinction level. The course requirements may also include specific GCSEs or a high GCSE score.

Degrees
Entry requirements are normally a BTEC National qualification or 2 A levels or Advanced Diploma plus certain GCSEs (or their equivalent). Degree courses often ask for English and/ or Maths GCSEs.

Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (HNCs/HNDs)
Entry requirements vary for this option. It is usually one A level pass, a BTEC National or Advanced Diploma. A common requirement is that the vocational qualification is in a subject related to the one that you wish to study.

Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHEs)
Enter requirements are usually the same entry requirements as for a degree courses.

Foundation degrees
Entry requirements tend to be flexible. Applicants need to show the potential to benefit from studying at higher education level. This could mean providing evidence of previous study at BTEC National /NVQ3 level or by providing evidence of what you have achieved in the workplace.

Applications can be made from mid-September to 15th January (see the timetable on page 12 - 13).
Higher Education – How do you apply?

Making an early application, which is well thought out, is important. Applicants can make up to five course choices on their form.

Applications are usually made through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). UCAS applications are made through Apply, which is a web-based application system that can be used anywhere with internet access. Staff in college will be able to show your son/daughter how to use Apply to fill in the form.

However, there are still some higher education courses where applications are made direct to the institution offering the course. College careers staff should be able to advise on which ones these are.

There is a lot of competition to get on to HE courses. Many institutions do not interview their applicants so they rely on two things to decide between so many good candidates:

The Personal Statement is a vitally important part of the application. It is essential to submit a good personal statement. Your son/daughter must get help to write their statement. This help can come from a tutor, college careers advisers or Connexions Personal Advisers who work at the college.

The Referee Statement, which is written by a form or course tutor, is just as important. A tutor will comment on whether the student has shown interest, attended regularly, submitted work on time, shown motivation, been persistent and had an interest in learning. They will also give predicted grades.

If your son/daughter is called for interview they need to prepare well ahead. Once again they must get help to prepare for the interview from tutors, college careers advisers or Connexions Personal Advisers.

What if they aren’t offered a place or they don’t get the grades required?

In spring your son/daughter will get responses to their applications. The UCAS website explains what they need to do at this point to accept their offers.

If they don’t get the offers they expect, or they don’t accept their offers all is not lost. UCAS provides two services:

UCAS Extra – if they are not offered a place on any of the courses they have applied for, or they do not accept their offers, UCAS will automatically contact them to offer this service. From late February all the institutions with vacancies list them on the UCAS website. Your son/daughter can look at these and decide which ones to apply for.

Clearing which is aimed at:

- Those not holding any offers
- Students holding conditional offers who do not get the required grades in their exams
- Those who apply to UCAS after 30 June

UCAS automatically informs applicants when they are eligible for this service and provides instructions about what to do.

There will be big demand for university courses over the next two years. This means that, if students do not get the grades they need, they must act immediately if they want to find a place through clearing.
Higher Education – how much does it cost?

You will know that higher education costs money and that many students leave university with debt. This can be a big issue for parents and carers but the cost of HE is really an investment for the future. The government helps by providing loans and grants.

The two main costs for students are tuition fees (£3225 in 2009/10) and living expenses, which also includes the cost of books and equipment for the course:

There are four possible sources of financial support for students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuition Fee Loan</th>
<th>This covers the cost of course fees. It is paid directly to the higher education institution. This loan has to be paid back.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Loan</td>
<td>This is to help with living and study costs. It is paid directly to the student in 3 termly instalments. The first 75% of the loan is guaranteed for all, but the other 25% is income assessed. This loan has to be paid back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Grant</td>
<td>This is to help with living and study costs. It is paid directly to the student in 3 termly instalments. Not all students are eligible, but 40% of students get full grant. It is aimed at students in families with incomes below £50,020. This is income assessed. The grant does not have to be paid back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bursary</td>
<td>Higher Education Institutions are expected to offer financial support in the form of bursaries to young people from families on low incomes. The value varies so check the details with each HEI.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What could this mean for you?

For example, a student from a family with an income of £25,000 who is planning to enter HE in 2009/10:

- Tuition Fee Loan £3225 (paid to university)
- Maintenance Loan £3497
- Maintenance Grant £319 (minimum)
- Total £6722
- Weekly amount to live on over 30 weeks = £224

Beware! Student finance is a complex area and there are changes to the details each year. The above is just an example to give you an idea of the amount of loans/grants a student may receive. Check the official website to find out how much your own son or daughter could be entitled to. www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance. You will find a calculator on the website where you can work out what your son/daughter can get. There are also a small number of courses where these funding guidelines do not apply. See the website above for clarification.

Loan repayment begins once students have left their course and are earning more than £1250 per month (2009/10). Students repay 9% of any earnings over this amount. The interest charged on all loans is linked to the rate of inflation. At the moment, because of the Bank of England base rate, the interest payments are 0%.

Care Leavers

Care Leavers will receive additional financial support from Tameside MBC during their time in full-time higher education. In addition, they are eligible for the full amount of grants and loans. They are eligible for bursaries from universities, too. Many universities now open halls of residence throughout holiday periods, which means that care leavers always have somewhere to live. Our local universities are applying for the Frank Buttle Trust kitemark, which shows that they have systems in place to support care leavers.

Disabled Student’s Allowance (DSA)

Young people with additional needs can get other financial support while they are at university. This can be support for their learning needs or for their personal care. The university will assess their needs at the beginning of the year and help them to apply for the DSA.

In many cases, you will be expected to supply a recent report on their disability. Previous statements and reports are often not acceptable. Once your son/daughter has accepted an offer at a university get in touch with their Disability Officer to discuss what you will need to do.
Other sources of information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aimhigher:</th>
<th>Information on getting into higher education, with useful links <a href="http://www.direct.gov.uk/uni">www.direct.gov.uk/uni</a></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connexions:</td>
<td>Information and advice on a range of topics <a href="http://www.connexions-direct.com">www.connexions-direct.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCAS:</td>
<td>The organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education in the UK <a href="http://www.ucas.com">www.ucas.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Finance:</td>
<td><a href="http://www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance">www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance</a> provides information about loans, benefits and grants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unistats:</td>
<td>Allows you to compare universities and colleges across the UK <a href="http://www.unistats.com">www.unistats.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill:</td>
<td>National Bureau for Students with Disabilities: Provides information and advice about HE for students with disabilities. <a href="http://www.skill.org.uk">www.skill.org.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Timetable for application to higher education - Year 1

| Year 1 |
|---|---|---|
| | Autumn | Spring | Summer |
| **UCAS/application procedure** | | | |
| **What you can do** | Encourage your son/daughter to think about their future | Encourage your son/daughter to research their ideas using websites and ‘virtual open days’. Gather some information about student finance. Help your son/daughter to look at what their financial situation is likely to be as a student. | |
| **What your son/daughter needs to do** | Start to consider where their present course may lead. Go to see their Connexions Adviser to discuss the options they have at the end of their course. | Start to research their ideas for higher education. Look into student finance and how the loans/grants systems work. | Identify 5 courses and places of study. |
## Timetable for application to higher education - Year 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Autumn</th>
<th>Spring</th>
<th>Summer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UCAS/application procedure</strong></td>
<td>1st September: UCAS opens for applications. 15th October: closing date for some courses (medicine, etc.)</td>
<td>15th January: Closing date for applications to be guaranteed consideration. Some colleges set earlier deadlines for applications. ‘Extra’ operates from late February for students who have not received/accepted any offers of places.</td>
<td>‘Clearing’ operates in August and September for students not holding offers/students who do not get the grades required in their offers/students applying after 30th June.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What you can do</strong></td>
<td>Encourage your son/daughter to attend open days, or even go along with them. Talk through the sort of questions they should ask on visits. Advise them to apply early for courses.</td>
<td>Make sure your son/daughter meets any deadlines set around their application. Start to help your son/daughter to consider how they will cope with the independence they will have if moving away from home. Help them to find out what support is available if they need it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What your son/daughter needs to do</strong></td>
<td>Apply early. Take care to put together a good personal statement and make sure you request a reference in good time. Check that you are aware of application deadlines for none UCAS organisations you are applying to.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This booklet was produced by Tameside Aimhigher in conjunction with Connexions, which provided the information. This information was correct at the time of printing.