



# SSGSA Guide to United Kingdom (UK)

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SSGSA 2020

# Application Guide

This guide hopes to simplify the otherwise knotty process of applying to the universities in the United Kingdom for masters' and research degrees. The UK is home to some of the world's best universities, and is a popular destination for students from across the world. As such, there is a wealth of information available online, but this guide hopes to help with the process.

## Timeline

The deadlines for application for undergraduate, postgraduate and research courses are highlighted on the websites of the university and the course description page, and the exact date varies every year.

## Masters' Courses

For masters students, there is no need to speak to a supervisor or possible academic connection at your prospective university. However, it is always a good idea to look into the individual modules and courses offered in your department to ensure that it is a good fit, and if there are some questions, you should write directly to the departmental contact given on the website. Do note that you should send these questions much prior to the actual deadline for applying, because the staff are very busy and generally take a great deal of time to respond. It is advisable to inquire into the nature of the course because sometimes the name of the degree might give the impression that it will focus on something but the actual experience turns out to be very different. Here, looking into specific modules/papers available is helpful because it gives you an idea about what you can reasonably expect from the course. Similarly, if there is a particular faculty member at that university with whom you wish to work, email them about your interests and ask if they think their institution will be a good host for your plans.

A rough timeline is as follows:

For admission in a masters' course at a UK university in October 2024 (you can extrapolate it to other sessions in future too)

### From Oct 2022 to March 2023

- Look for courses in universities which are reputable and have people working in your area. Sometimes, the most famous universities (for instance, Oxford or Cambridge) may not necessarily have the specialisation which is best suited, and it is better to apply to universities which are most beneficial to you in terms of the subject area and specialisation (for instance, Imperial College London for science, LSE for economics, political science, and international relations, St Andrews for literature and mathematics etc). Personal research is a key instrument that students often overlook. Each university and course page has innumerable links that give a holistic picture of each aspect of the program.
- Get your documents in order: Make sure you give yourself ample time to have all your degrees, transcripts, certificates and other documents neatly organised in a folder.
- Explore Funding and Scholarship pages in depth: There are often a lot of obscure scholarships which are available but are not very famous, so there is relatively little competition for those. In addition, keep an eye out for external funding (a list is available at the end of the guide).
- Look at the requirements for admissions, such as marks in examinations, number of references (some universities may not need any, others might require three), language test, statement of purpose, and other documents. The SSGSA has a great deal of advice on writing Statements of Purpose, and it is important to write a genuine statement, which is tailored to your proposed university.

### April 2023 to September 2023

- Write to your shortlisted universities, particularly the Programme Convenor or Postgraduate Coordinator asking relevant questions, expressing your interests in the subject and whether they think their university is a good fit. This is optional, and most of the information is readily available online.

- Note that coordinators etc may take a long time to respond because of the summer vacation or exams in their university
- Draft your statement of purpose, and if possible, have it read by those you trust to give good feedback. This may include your teachers, friends, seniors, the SSGSA mentors, or family members. Revise and improve it continually.
- Speak to your possible referees and send them an up-to-date CV as well as the most recent draft proposal and previous academic work. It is advisable to have multiple referees, possibly 5-6, so that you are not only approaching one person for all your applications when you will be applying to ten universities. Ensure that they have access to an academic/university email address (which ends with @amu.ac.in ) because universities abroad are starting to refuse personal email addresses. When it comes to the content of references, it is a good idea to have a discussion with your referees about your expectations with the referees. A good referee uses measurable rather than abstract statements to define your personal progress. (He/she is a meritorious student vs. he/she has scored an A+ (91-100/100) in all of my papers, particularly coming up with so and so innovative projects/ assignments.

### October 2023 to January 2024

- Fill out the application forms for the universities as they open by October and November, and be sure to keep track of the deadlines of your possible fundings. It is a good idea to keep an excel sheet that has the details of the university, course, potential supervisor, course deadline and funding source for that particular program as it reduces the chances of missing or confusing deadlines.
- Give your referees at least two weeks' time before the deadline so that they can send in supporting material and references for you, and neither you nor they are in a panic.
- Since most funding applications close by the end of January, you should be done with all of your applications by then unless you also have the option to self-fund.
- After that, it's just a waiting game! However, you can use this time to read up on your preferred area, taking notes, and getting ahead on your studies.

### PhD Students

For PhD aspirants, it is necessary to approach a supervisor well in advance of any funding deadline (at least two months prior) because most funding applications also require the supervisors' recommendation. They will be willing to recommend your application only if they are sure about you and their suitability to lead your project. There are some universities which may allow you to apply without having approached a specific supervisor though they may recommend it, such as the University of Warwick, or where the university will automatically allot you a supervisor based on their judgement of compatibility and availability for supervision, such as the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. However, it is necessary that there are faculty members who are working in your areas of interest for your application to even be considered. Naturally, this advice will vary from discipline to discipline so it is also worthwhile to engage with the website of your prospective course in order to better familiarise yourself with the guidelines.

A rough timeline is as follows:

For admission into PhD at a UK university in October 2024

#### From now to March 2023

- Look for prospective supervisors in your preferred areas. This can be done either through looking at university faculty pages or by reading recent literature specific to your area and looking at profiles of people who stimulate your research interest.
- Explore Funding and Scholarship pages in depth: There are often a lot of obscure scholarships which are available but are not very famous, so there is relatively little competition for those.
- Draft a rough proposal of your work (around 800-1000) words, which has references and mentions why your proposed study is unique. For PhD students, a research proposal is a mandatory requirement for the application and is different from a Statement of Purpose. If you are intending to apply for a PhD, make sure you have a strong proposal ready.

### April 2023 to September 2023

- Write to your shortlisted supervisors, attaching your draft of research proposal, your CV and the reason why you wish to work with them / at their university
- Note that prospective supervisors may take a long time to respond because of the summer vacation or exams in their university
- Revise your draft proposals based on the response from the supervisor. At this point, it is likely you may have multiple prospective supervisors for the same topic, and they may give different and even contrasting advice. Work on each version separately.
- Speak to your possible referees and send them an up-to-date CV as well as the most recent draft proposal and previous academic work. It is advisable to have multiple referees, possibly 5-6, so that you are not only approaching one person for all your applications when you will be applying to ten universities. Ensure that they have access to an academic/university email address (which ends with @amu.ac.in ) because universities abroad are starting to refuse personal email addresses.

### October 2023 to January 2024

- Fill out the application forms for the universities as they open by October and November, and be sure to keep track of the deadlines of your possible fundings.
- Give your prospective supervisor and your referees at least two weeks' time before the deadline so that they can send in supporting material and references for you, and neither you nor they are in a panic.
- Since most funding applications close by the end of January, you should be done with all of your applications by then.
- You may be invited for an interview. Policies regarding this vary from university to university. In some cases, the interview is merely a formality where the prospective supervisors and you spend a couple of minutes expanding on the ideas shared in the proposal, whereas in other cases, it may be the deciding factor for your admission.

- After that, it's just a waiting game! However, you can use this time to read up on your preferred research area, taking notes, thinking of chapters and secondary sources, and getting ahead on your studies.

## Process

### Costs

#### Application Fees

Very few universities in the UK charge application fees, either for masters' or PhD applications. Notable are the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, but there has been a shift towards not charging the application fee in the forthcoming years. At the moment, the fees for application are around £75 (INR 7500) for masters' courses, and £90 (INR 9000) for PhD courses. However, most universities do **not** charge application fees.

#### Course Fees

Universities in the UK charge very high fees from international students, ranging from £20000 to £25000 (Twenty to twenty five lakhs INR) per academic year, and there are very few scholarships, and even those are very competitive. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge can be even more expensive, approximately 10 lakh rupees annually *more* than the usual.

This is in addition to the living costs, which are pegged around

However, there are some general indicators which the selection committees look for, and these are given below. Please note these are not necessarily in order:

- **Demonstrable track record of excellence:** Scholarship providers want only the best, and if the applicant has consistently achieved a good academic record, they are more likely to be selected. For instance, it is advisable to mention, or have your referees mention that you are likely to be awarded the gold/silver medal based on your performance in the university examination, or that you had stood third in a cohort of 200 students, or that you are among the 3% of top performing students of your class. It will help the selection committee in contextualising your application. Your research proposal will also be evaluated for academic rigor and understanding.



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- **Previous funding:** Any scholarship already awarded proves to the selection committee that the applicant has been considered worthy by some funding agency, and therefore tips the scales in the applicant's favour. The amount of the scholarship is not as important as the selection for the scholarship, so it is always a good idea to add a line or two about the nature of the scholarship and the selection process, if any. For instance, the Sir Syed Global Scholar Award can be described as a scholarship awarded to especially meritorious students who are mentored for studies abroad, who are selected through a university-wide competition and interview. Similarly, departmental scholarships (in AMU, they are often called Merit-cum-Means scholarship) are awarded generally on the basis of a merit test, and it is worthwhile to mention these awards.
- **Knowledge Exchange and Impact:** In the UK particularly, scholarships provided by the government have an emphasis on the possible impact of your work outside the university sphere. In other words, scholarship providers will look more favourably on those candidates whose work will have a bearing on the world outside academia. In addition, it is also important to present the impact of your work which will be understood by someone who is not an expert in your field. In particular, areas which generate a lot of interest are public health, climate change, sustainability and development impact.
- **Extracurriculars:** It is considered a sign of a well-rounded personality to have interests outside university, particularly if one is engaged in leadership and organisational roles. It allows scholarship providers an insight into the candidate's ability to work with teams, deal with pressure, and to be better connected with the world. It is very important to contextualise your extracurricular activities and possibly describe the scope and ambit of your role. For instance, "Organised Sir Syed Day in my hall" makes perfect sense to every Alig, but for the readers of your application, all of these terms are unfamiliar. Therefore, it would be better advised to expand on the exact role you had, whether it was arranging catering, liaising with guests, or managing the general location. Similarly, leadership positions and roles are best explained with an additional remark about their nature and the responsibilities you discharged while holding the position. "Literary Secretary " becomes better fleshed out when described as "arranging a speech competition among underprivileged schoolchildren in order to raise awareness about basic hygiene and sanitation". In addition, it is best to limit extracurriculars to university life, because these will be more recent, and be sure to mention any awards and the scope of the competition. More often than not, a big list of extra curricular activities overshadows the important events which demonstrate your ability to lead and be a well-rounded person. Prioritise what to keep and know what to omit in this area.

### Requirements

- English Language Test

The IELTS and TOEFL exams are universal tests which have almost global acceptance, and are usually required for international students. A good idea is to contact the Department and the International Office to ask if they will consider granting an English language requirement waiver. In this email, it is worthwhile to mention whether you have conducted your entire schooling or higher education in English, and the requirements of the Aligarh Muslim University (which generally demands Compulsory English papers in all degrees). Even universities which may seem inflexible about English language tests can often be very cooperative in this regard. However, it is always a good idea to have a standardised test result that illustrates your capability of studying in the UK. Every course will have a minimum requirement of the overall score and the particular sections.

- Good Academic Record

Universities generally look for at least first division marks in your previous academic venture. Some universities may have an equivalence chart available on their website, but for the most part, one should aim for at least 70% or higher marks in order to be considered for scholarships, while anything above 60% should be enough to hold you in good stead for admission.

### Visa

It is immensely easy to get a student visa if you have managed to secure a scholarship as the funding body becomes your financial guarantor. If you are going as a self-funded student or with partial funding, the UK government stipulates that you must have enough money to pay for the tuition fees as well as manage the cost of living. This amount changes every year, and the exact regulations and figure will be available on the UK government visa website, as well as on the Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) document which will be provided to you by your university. The amount that is required must be in your bank account at least 28 days prior to the date of your application.

You can only apply 6 months before your course starts and you will be granted an entry vignette that details a 90-day month window in which you can travel to the UK. The visa sticker/vignette is required only for the initial entry into the UK. After your arrival, you will be provided with a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) card approximately 15-20 days after your

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entry. This will carry the date till which you can stay on in the UK, and you will need this document when travelling in and out of the country and for proving your residence in the UK.

The visa process also requires you to undergo a Tuberculosis test at the designated test centre details of which will be in the visa application.

The visa costs are high too, and even some fully-funded scholarships (such as those provided by the UK government through the UKRI bodies) are unable to provide visa costs. An approximate breakdown is given as follows:

- Visa application fee: Rs 40,000  
This is the processing fee for the actual visa application
- Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS): £470 (approximately Rs 50000) per year of your course  
This provides you with free healthcare in the UK through the NHS (National Health Service) which includes all emergency, non-emergency, and routine healthcare.
- Tuberculosis Test Fee: Rs 2500  
This is a requirement of the visa application, and a list of approved centres is available on the visa website. It is important to get the test at only these centres, as other reports will not be considered valid. A scan of the report has to be uploaded in your visa application, and you will have to carry the original document with you to the UK
- You will have to visit your local visa office (complete list is available on the visa website, and includes many major cities across India) to provide your biometrics such as fingerprints and photographs etc. This cost is also not borne by scholarship providers, and can sometimes be a high amount if your visa centre is located far away.

## Sources of Funding

In addition to joining ongoing projects at the university, or finding places with a prospective supervisor/principal investigator, there are some scholarship bodies. As ever, it is a good idea to thoroughly check the Funding and Scholarship pages of each individual university, as these would be too numerous to list here, and they may provide partial or even full scholarships.

Of course, it is inevitable that these positions are highly coveted and very competitive. Since the exit of the UK from the European Union (Brexit), EU students have also been classed as international students, further increasing the intensity of competition. UKRI has councils of different sectors where they fund studentship. More details:

1. <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-fund-studentships/>

2. <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-a-studentship-to-fund-your-doctorate/>
3. <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/epsrc/studentships/>

- The London Arts and Humanities Partnership
- Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership
- White Rose Consortium
- University of Warwick Chancellor's International Scholarship
- Cambridge Trust and International Scholarships
- Gates Cambridge Scholarship
- Oxford Clarendon Scholarships
- University of Edinburgh Doctoral College Scholarship
- University of Edinburgh Faculty Scholarship
- UCL Global Scholarship
- Commonwealth Masters' Scholarship
- Commonwealth Shared Scholarship
- Chevening Scholarship
- INLAKS Scholarship
- Tata Trust Scholarship
- Mahindra Trust Scholarship
- Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities
- Gates Cambridge Scholarship
- [https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/?filter\\_council%5B%5D=820](https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/?filter_council%5B%5D=820)
- University of Bristol Think Big Scholarship

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pgstudy/funding/developing-solutions-masters-scholarship>

Websites: [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk) and [www.findaphd.com](http://www.findaphd.com) list opportunities for PhDs regularly.

<https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-research-funding-guide/>

## Life in the UK

There is a wealth of information pertaining to life in the UK available on the internet, and most reputable universities also have an international students office or even have offices based in India, some important aspects have been touched upon here.

The best and surest source of information regarding life in the UK, particularly for international students, is undeniably the UKCISA: <https://ukcisa.org.uk/> The UK Council for International Student Affairs covers all aspects of life that an international student may face, and every UK university is a member of this association and abides by its advice and rules.

## Accommodation

Possibly the biggest concern one may have is regarding accommodation, and it can be trickier in major cities like London and Manchester, and in university towns like Oxford or Cambridge, where there are more students than available student accommodation. The University housing service will arrange for accommodation, but the earlier one is able to apply for accommodation, the better one's chances are for getting the best (most conveniently located / most affordable) rooms. While the universities try to prioritise international students/ students who previously have not studied in the UK before, there may be the likelihood that the university is unable to provide accommodation for you in the halls of residence or university housing. In that case, it is advisable to get in touch with your supervisor, programme convenor, or an alumni or senior that you know of to help you out. They may be able to put you in touch with other students who are willing to house-share with you.

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In the first year, it is generally a good idea to stay in university housing because one is able to make the most of the university experience in that way, by living with students, and also because they are more reliable and there is no chance of you being scammed.

In the UK, private properties require you to have a guarantor in place who will declare that they will pay your rent in case you fail to do so. This is very difficult for international students, and universities and funding bodies are not allowed to act as guarantors, so choosing university accommodation in the initial year is a better idea. In subsequent years, you can choose to share a house with friends or may continue in university accommodation, provided it is available.

There are a lot of scams in the property market, so it is important to be very careful of providing money to any private provider unless they can be verified, because this money cannot be recovered.

## Bank Account

To be able to open a bank account, you have to be able to prove your resident status in the UK. It is important at this point to clarify that as a full-time student, you are a "Resident" in the UK, and this is proved by your Biometric Residence Permit (BRP). Sometimes, it can be confusing because your citizenship is Indian and you are in the UK on a visa, but for legal purposes you are classified as a Resident, which allows you to open bank accounts, get services etc.

Within the first few weeks, you will get your BRP. Until then, you cannot apply for a bank account in the UK. So it is a good idea to take some money from home for spending in the first few weeks, especially because you will encounter a lot of expenses when you are setting up your room. The easiest option is to bring cash from home, but there are issues of safety with large amounts of money, so you may also explore preloaded cards available at major banks, such as Axis Bank or SBI, where you can load money in INR in India, and spend it as GBP in the UK. The benefit is that you will be able to use your card online, for buying things from Amazon and other stores, as well as paying for purchases in stores. It is safer and more secure.

Initially, it is best not to take too much cash with you, as you can pay for everything with cards, and once you have your UK bank account, you can set up contactless payment with your phone too.

To open a bank account, you will need your BRP, proof of address, and sometimes a student letter. The BRP will be provided to you by the UK government, either through your university

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or at the local post office, depending upon what option you choose. The proof of address is a letter provided by your landlord (in case you are living in university accommodation, this will be your university) which states that they confirm that you are living at the address you have provided in your application. The student letter is a similar letter from your university confirming your course and admission into the university. Sometimes, the university letter may also carry your address.

You must apply for a bank account using the apps available for them, and you will have to provide a photo or short video of yourself, a photo of your BRP, and a scan or photo of your proof of address or student letter. If the bank requires anything else, they will contact you. Almost all banks are the same, but the online banks are generally quicker and have easier to use apps. Examples of these are Starling or Monzo. They are safe, and are regulated by the government and comply with the same standards as all other banks. High street banks, such as Barclays, HSBC, or Lloyds, TSB, Nationwide, may generally take more time, and some of their services, such as international money transfers may be more expensive.

It is always a good idea to have at least two bank accounts. One with the majority of your money, from which you transfer small amounts into the account which you use. This serves two purposes: it allows you to keep an eye on your budget, and if your card is lost or your account hacked, you do not lose too much money, and have a back-up.

If you anticipate getting money from home during your education, it might also be worthwhile to check out NRO/NRE accounts available at most major Indian banks, where they charge low rates of conversion from INR to GBP, which reduces the cost incurred in international transfers.

## Cost of Living

### Before coming to the UK

There are multiple hidden costs that are embedded in the procedure. Whether or not you are on a scholarship, the whole process takes money that you must have before you begin your studies. Apart from application fees for university admissions and standardised tests, there is also fees for the Visa and Health Insurance that needs to be given before you begin your studies (add amounts for PhD and Masters). While it varies, students on full-scholarship also need to pay this amount out of pocket and are usually reimbursed with their first stipend which is transferred only after they open a UK based bank account (Chevening and Commonwealth scholars usually do not have to pay IHS while scholars with other funding agencies do). Some universities also ask for a deposit to secure your spot and this is an additional cost that should be considered while applying. Since August/ September is when most of the universities start their term, there is a massive rush in students trying to enter the UK which substantially raises the cost of the flight ticket. Thus, if you have your admission



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and funding in place before mid-June, it is a good idea to consider booking your tickets well ahead of time.

### In the UK

The UK is an expensive country and there is a very high cost of living, on everything, ranging from clothes and food to travelling and electronics.

The biggest cost is generally on food and groceries, so it is a very good idea to learn how to cook, as eating out every day can become very expensive and can often be unhealthy. For instance, a week's worth of groceries for one individual can be around £25-30, while just one meal out at a restaurant can easily be £15. All university accommodations are provided with kitchens, equipped with stoves and ovens, and fridge-freezers, so you can easily save a lot of money by cooking at home.

## Useful Tips

You understand your career trajectory best. While it is a good idea to take advice from those who have studied in the UK or have been awarded scholarships, and read sample SoPs, only you can articulate your academic journey accurately. Instead of worrying about what makes a successful SoP, it is a good idea to invest in thinking about which is the best way to tell your story.

Read the eligibility criteria and scholarship documents very carefully. They clearly specify the aspects they are looking for. Make sure your application fulfils all of their criteria.

A lot of UK universities do not charge application fees thereby giving you a chance to expand your list and increase your chances of admission.

It is best to arrive in the UK at least a week before your term officially starts. Ideally, it should be 9-10 days prior in order to ensure you comfortably settle in, get to have a sense of directions and transportation and feel better positioned to begin your degree.

## Transport

Transport connections and modes vary tremendously depending upon the location of your university, and the nature of the place you are living in. Larger cities generally have better public transport, and are better connected to the rest of the UK, and indeed, the rest of the world. Information about local transport is available at county offices and at your university.



As students, you will be entitled to discounted tickets on trains and buses, but there is generally a Railcard or Coachcard that you will have to purchase before the discounts can be applied. It is worthwhile to seriously consider how often you will use them, and if it will be worth it.

## Health Insurance

After successfully getting the visa and paying for the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), the National Health Service (NHS) can be accessed for free. After arriving in the UK, you need to visit your local General Practitioner (GP), which is usually the one closest to your accommodation, and register with them. You will then be provided with a unique NHS number that will be used for all future instances.

While doctor appointments or visits to hospitals are covered under the service, there are additional charges for prescriptions to get medicines, and for eye and dental treatments.