

Academic Differences for Native English Speaking International Students

As a student from a country with many similarities to the UK, including having English as the first language, you may think that the academic systems are also very similar. In some ways this is true, but there are also important differences that you should be aware of. Being aware of these differences will ensure that you are fully prepared to face any of the academic challenges that may face you during your time at UEA, hopefully making the academic transition between your home university and UEA a smooth one.

Glossary

Some of the terms you use may have slightly different meanings to what you are used to. It is a good idea to familiarise yourself with the differences between these terms to avoid confusion.

Term	Meaning
Academic Adviser	Undergraduates have an academic adviser from their school who they can ask for advice about courses and options.
Course	In the UK a course refers to the degree that you are taking. For example English, Civil Engineering, Medicine. Also known in North America as your major.
Dissertation	A very long report describing the results of an original study. Completed in the final year of a Bachelor's or as part of a higher degree such as a Masters.
Doctor	In the UK an academic Doctor refers to someone who has completed a PhD.
Faculty	A faculty is a collection of academic departments that are grouped together for teaching research and administrative purposes. At UEA there are four faculties- Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences and Health Sciences- these are made up of individual schools (e.g. BIO, NBS, ECO, MED)
Fresher	The term for a first year student. There are no specific terms for students in other years.
Formative	An assessment that does not count towards your final grade.
Graduate	Someone who has completed an undergraduate course of study and obtained a Bachelor's degree. A graduate is not the same as a post-graduate student.
Intercalating	This term varies from university to university but at UEA it refers to someone who is taking a year out from their degree due to circumstances such as illness.
Lectures	A formal presentation of ideas and information by a member of academic staff to a fairly large group of students.
Module	You take several different modules each term, modules are also known in other countries as courses or classes.
Postgraduate	A student who is studying a second or third degree (usually Masters or PhD) following graduation from an undergraduate course.
Professor	A Professor refers to the highest level lecturers at a university. You do not necessarily have to be a Doctor to be a Professor.
Seminar/Tutorial	A group of, or individual, students meet to discuss a subject with a tutor. They are more interactive than a lecture and are often student led.
Students' Union	Each university has a Students' Union (SU) which represents the interests of students and works in their interest about a whole range of issues such as tuition fees etc. The Students Union is also the focal point for social activities, clubs and societies.
Summative	An assessment that does count towards your final grade.

Types of Assessment

Coursework

You are likely to be required to complete some form of coursework for each of your modules and this is something you are likely to have done at your home university. One of the most important things to note about coursework at British universities is the deadlines for when it needs to be handed in. Deadlines in the UK are very strict! If you miss a deadline without a very good reason (and evidence to prove this reason, such as a note from your doctor to certify that you have been ill) you are likely to be penalised. Penalties can range from losing a percent of your mark for each day you are late to being awarded a zero. Check with your School whether your coursework needs to be handed in electronically, in paper-copy, or both. You should allow sufficient time to print your work and to get to where it needs to be handed in, where there may be queues. You could be punished even if you are just a few minutes late for the deadline so **DO NOT MISS DEADLINES!**

Exams

You may be used to having continual assessments throughout the term, such as one, if not more, 'mid-term' exams or a series of 'response papers' on what you are studying, before your final exam at the end of term. In the UK, there are modules that also use this system but it is also very common to have one exam at the end of your module that is worth a high percentage of the final grade. In some cases the final exam may be worth 100% of the final grade. Assessments during term time are also not usually referred to as mid-terms. You are also likely to find that modules that you took in the Autumn semester are examined at the end of the Spring semester.

The British system of not having continuous directly monitored work may at first come as a shock. British universities expect students to be more independent in their learning and so you may find you have fewer contact hours and more private study time, which may feel at first as though you are not expected to do as much work. However, this is not the case! British universities just expect their students to be motivated enough to manage their private time well to study.

Exams in the form of essays are common. You may be expected to write up to three essays in an exam, with an hour for each essay. Obviously to write such essays you need to have an in-depth knowledge of the subject you are discussing. Lecturers and tutors will be able to tell if you have not properly prepared as writing tends to become less detailed and more convoluted. Exams tend to be marked by the lecturers themselves, British universities do not usually have 'teaching assistants' as you may know them. The British university marking system is also quite formal. You will find that your exams tend to be 'double-marked'. That is, two different members of the academic staff will review and mark your work to provide your final grade. This usually means that your final mark cannot be changed without going through a formal appeals procedure.

Styles of Writing

The writing style that you are required to use in the UK may be quite different from that which you are used to. British academic writing is usually concise, impersonal and in the third person especially when expressing opinions, for example 'It is thought that...' rather than 'I think that...'. Opinion-led evaluation worked should not replace analysis and all work should be well exemplified. High marks are given to students who display a good depth of knowledge; detail is very important and to get this detail you need to avoid writing unnecessarily long or convoluted sentences or including information that is irrelevant to the question you are answering.

You may be used to receiving essay 'prompts' from which you decide your own essay question. Some tutors may not mind you interpreting their titles in this way. However, some will also find this evasive and will mark you down for not answering the question provided. Unless specified it is best to answer the question given or closely follow the title given. Again it is worth talking to your lecturer about this if you are unsure. In exams- ALWAYS follow the question.

Spelling

Most staff will not penalise you for using American spelling as long as you are consistent through your work. If you are worried, check with your lecturer or tutor before you begin writing a piece of work. Most computers nowadays have transatlantic spell checkers that can highlight this for you as you type.

Format

You should check your module handbook and/or ask your tutor about the format your work needs to be in. Some schools specify fonts and border spacing that they require all pieces of submitted work to be in. You may be used to judging the length of your essay based on a page count for example, whereas in the UK word counts are often used. If it is done by the page count you should see whether it is single or double spaced before you begin, to avoid any frustration if you find you have started incorrectly.

Research

You are likely to be provided with reading lists for each of your modules. However, these lists are just a starting point for your independent reading and research. Independent learning is highly valued in British universities and to get the highest marks you will be expected to show evidence of further reading outside of the reading list. Although this may seem a daunting prospect at first, there are many people around the university who will be able to help you find resources to do this. Each faculty has its own librarian who can help you find course specific information and the Learning Enhancement Team in the Dean of Students' Office can help provide advice on research methods. The UEA library is well stocked and you are likely to find multiple copies of core text books and many other resources. If you wish to buy your text books, they are usually very reasonably priced in shops (around a third to a half cheaper than in North America) and you can often find good quality second hand books by looking on the internet or on noticeboards around the university.

Referencing

Referencing systems are generally universal and so you should not face too many problems here. The main types of referencing used are Harvard, MLA and MHRA. If you are in doubt about which style to use, ask your lecturer to clarify which they would prefer. The Learning Enhancement Team has study guides available to help you with referencing (available as hard copies in the DOS office or online) and have drop-in session for quick questions.

For more information on referencing please see the plagiarism section on the UEA website:

http://www.uea.ac.uk/services/students/let_service/let_plagiarism_aware/avoid_plagiarism

You should be aware that plagiarism is taken extremely seriously at UEA and there are measures in place to ensure it doesn't happen, for example electronic checking systems such as Turnitin. *Do not plagiarise* as you may well find yourself failing modules and even at times even your entire degree.

Grading System

For *undergraduates*, a first (1st) class degree is the best you can achieve; second class is divided into upper second class (2.1) and lower second class (2.2). A third class degree (3rd) is the lowest pass mark you can obtain. The table below shows the percentages to which these grades are equivalent at British universities.

1 st Class degree	70% or above	A
Second Class upper (2.1)	60%-69%	B
Second Class lower (2.2)	50-59%	C
Third Class degree	40-49%	D
Fail	39% or below	F

You may be used to getting a mark in the form of an A,B,C etc. This type of marking is not frequently used in British universities except in medicine. The equivalent British grades are shown in the table above.

For *postgraduates*, the system is simpler. A mark of 70% or above is a distinction, anything from 50-69% is a pass, while below 50% is a fail.