

How to Choose a University Course

Choosing a university course is like writing an A Level essay: if you conduct careful research and refer closely to the evidence in reaching unprejudiced conclusions, you will achieve a good result.

Applicants often find it difficult to penetrate beyond the marketing gloss of prospectuses, in which every university is top in some survey, is near a “vibrant” city, and has constant sunshine beaming down on uniformly contented students.

Blind reliance on brand name prejudice, a prejudice bolstered with reference to clumsily constructed league tables and what mythical employers want, is a high-risk strategy. As with the Sixth Form essay, a more evidence-based approach is advisable. It will also help an applicant to draw up a short list from what seems an overwhelmingly long list of courses.

Start at the UCAS website (www.ucas.com) with “Search for Courses”. This will show which universities offer a particular subject or combination. All university websites can be reached from the UCAS website: they give much more detailed information about compulsory and optional modules than is found in the hard copy prospectus, and departmental entries give a good indication of the spread of interests among the academic staff. There are many strands, for instance, which might be woven into a French course: anything from medieval literature to translations of “The Simpsons”. Some websites will give details of course modules, and even lecture notes. Make no assumptions. Even courses whose content is largely determined by external professional bodies might be delivered in very different ways. Medicine is a good example.

Those who wish to apply to research-intensive universities, in which, to a large extent, students are expected to teach themselves by using research-based methods, should look at the results of the Research Assessment Exercise published at the end of 2008 (www.rae.ac.uk). These give an indication of an individual department’s research strengths but suggest nothing about the quality of the teaching.

Some universities give detailed information about the jobs which their graduates have entered: the Careers Service section of the website should point you towards it. It is no coincidence that among those universities which are keen to provide this information are those which offer a year’s paid work placement as part of a course: usually two years at university, one year in work, and a final year at university (hence the term “sandwich” course). Business Studies applicants, for instance, should consider that the extra year taken to complete a degree might be well repaid by a much enhanced c.v. in a competitive field – or even by the promise of a job on graduation from the placement.

The National Student Survey (available at unistats.direct.gov.uk) of satisfaction among final year students is a useful check, but remember that it might be more a reflection of how easily students are satisfied than of the quality of what is provided. Law students seem to be particularly hard to please!

Look at the Student Union websites or Alternative Prospectuses of individual universities. Sometimes the election manifesto of an Academic Vice-President on the website will highlight major academic issues within the university, such as lack of feedback on examination results.

It is very important to ask Admissions Tutors about contact time, in particular the size and frequency of tutorials/classes/seminars (Lecture size is far less crucial.). At one “big brand name” university, the smallest first year classes range from 6 to 30 students, depending on the subject. I think that

current class sizes should be published in prospectuses, in the interests of “transparency”, but they rarely are. Moreover, the role of a “Personal Tutor” can be interpreted very differently, even within the same university.

It is vital to visit. I have visited all 120 UK universities during the last few years, and each one has its own “feel”: a mixture of situation, site(s), size and atmosphere, the last of which is, of course, most discernible when students are there.

Current students are the most important source of information on the current situation in their degree programmes. Quizzing the student helpers at an Open Day might give as much insight as hearing the formal departmental talks.

The good news is that most students seem contented with what is on offer. At Sherborne, we have for many years conducted an annual survey of those who left 7 years before, who have passed through university and started a career; a few years ago, worried by reports about varying teaching provision at universities, we instituted a further survey of those who left 3 years before. This feedback is our single most important resource.

With the advent of higher tuition fees in UK universities, potential applicants need to consider carefully the full range of routes open to those leaving school at 18 years, including: entering employment directly, perhaps as part of a formal apprenticeship; schemes combining employment with university study; and university study abroad.

Such an evidence-based approach might not yield conclusive results, and a large dose of intellectual humility is advisable among those of us who are scratching at the surface of a huge subject. However, this is more likely to be effective than relying on a false sense of continuity in a rapidly changing area. One campus, for instance, has been part of three universities in almost as many years, and those who were undergraduates 20 or 30 years ago would do well to check current student numbers before advancing claims about their alma mater based on their own nostalgia. Above all, if anyone makes sweeping statements like “university x is good for subject y”, ask for the evidence and its date. It is what a conscientious A Level student should be doing anyway.

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Checklist

Read:

1. “Search for Courses” on UCAS website
2. Course details, department entries, and graduate destinations on university websites
3. Results of 2008 Research Assessment Exercise
4. Student Union websites
5. National Student Survey results
6. Consider “sandwich” courses for work-related subjects
7. Ask about size & frequency of tutorials/classes/seminars
8. Speak to current students
9. Visit universities
10. Rely on datable evidence. Never rely on hearsay or assumption.