



British International School Riyadh

University Open Days

'It was the ice cream van that swung it'

What should you look out for at an university open day? Emma Woolley went to six and gives some advice on what to take note of and what to disregard

Tours are great for seeing the obvious student haunts, but try explore the area on your own too. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

Having to decide which university you want to go to is something that jumps at you out of the blue. I'd only just finished my GCSEs and suddenly people were asking me where I wanted to go to university, and what I wanted to do a degree in. I really didn't have a clue. After lots of nagging from my mum, I started looking into the whole idea; I found a few I liked the sound of - well, six universities dotted around the country, to be exact - and booked in for their open days.

Buy the time I started my visits I hadn't decided what course I wanted to do, so I sat through a through a good number of Introduction to law at Nottingham and Welcome to mathematics at Bristol style talks. These aren't often the most exciting of speeches, but if you're stuck in a subject dilemma, attending talks for both options helps to give you a better idea. Something in the approach or course structure of one might just swing the balance to settle your decision.

The thing to remember at these talks is that their subjects are the lecturers' passions. My chosen subject was maths and to budding mathematicians, I would say: do not be alarmed when you find yourself on the receiving end of a detailed description of Markov chains, which you simply cannot follow. Given the opportunity to excite new [students](#), I think lecturers can get a bit ... well, geeky and carried away. I can honestly say I didn't understand a word of most of these "sample lectures", but to my pleasant surprise I am actually doing well at uni, so there was no need to be panicked. They did, however, lead me to wonder about the support I might want at uni and if, like me, you would be reassured by this, don't be embarrassed to ask. I got the impression from my guide at Bristol that the university puts a lot of emphasis on research, but at Exeter people talked a lot about open office hours to question lecturers and showed me the "learning resources room" where maths students work on their coursework together.

I didn't pay much attention to halls on open days as I wasn't thinking that far ahead, but I did find myself wanting to know more later on. If you get the chance to do an accommodation tour, or even just a moment to chat to a student guide about this, do it. I'm not sure whether it is true of all universities, but certainly at Exeter and a few of my friends' universities, the halls are known to attract different types of people and, as a result, each has a slightly different feel. Whether it's the shared dinners, "more rah" or "cheap cheerful party" halls you're looking for, this is something a student would be able to tell you that's not in the guide book.

The most important thing, I would say, is to explore the area. Tours are great for seeing the obvious student haunts, the library, sports facilities, computer labs etc but, if you can, explore the campus and city on your own.

I visited Durham, Warwick, and Bath too, but Nottingham and Exeter were my final choices, and Exeter was my favourite: partly for its academic "respectability" but in the end it was also because the campus was attractively green, the city was nice, I'd heard the nightlife was good and perhaps because on the day of my visit the sun was shining and there was an ice cream van on campus. How could I resist?