



British International School Riyadh

University Guide: Want a place? Inside Knowledge

Admissions tutors are the best people to advise students applying to university. Here are some expert tips on everything from humour to using Twitter

If you're thinking about applying to university, you're probably confused about what to expect. As part of the first cohort to be hit with tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year, you're likely to be wondering what the final bill will actually be and whether it's worth it, as well as the usual questions about where to go, what to study ... and will you get in?

Over the last five years, the number of applicants to UK universities has soared to a record high. Some 633,800 [students](#) want to start full-time undergraduate degrees this September, chasing around 490,000 places. That's partly due to candidates trying to get to university before tuition fees rise. A survey of current students found that half would not have bothered with university at £9,000 a year.

But student life is still an unparalleled educational and social experience. So if you want to go, you should be more determined than ever to get on to the best possible course at your ideal university.

But how to actually get a place? Read on. We've got exclusive tips from the very people who'll be reading your personal statements this autumn. They reveal what they really want to see on a Ucas form, and advise how to pick a course – and why following them on Twitter could put you on the path to a cap'n'gown.

What to study?

Gloomy admissions statistics might leave you wondering whether the best course is the one that's most likely to offer you a place. It's not. Imagine dragging yourself to lectures to study something you hate for three or more years. Snoringly dull. Pick a course you'll be motivated to study – either a subject that fascinates you or a vocational course that sets you on the path to your dream career.

Make a list of possible courses by scouring prospectuses and speaking to teachers, students and lecturers. Think laterally: top courses such as economics and medicine fill up fast, but business studies or medical sciences might boost your chances. Finally, remember to use each of your five Ucas choices, cover a range of entry requirements, and be certain your qualifications (or predictions) fulfil them all.

• **"Don't be afraid to contact a university to find out more** – this shows interest and commitment," says admissions tutor John Wheeler at Staffordshire University. "Many universities make a record of personal contact, and may use it in their decision-making. We want applicants to show that they've really thought about the course – this can come through in the application form, at open days or through personal contact."

- **The best way to get a place is to prove you love the subject and all it entails**, says Lucy Backhurst, Newcastle University's head of admissions. "Be focused when making your choices," she adds. "Not all courses are the same. In medicine, for example, keep an eye out for words like 'problem-based learning', 'traditional' and 'case-led', and find out what they really mean."
- **"Don't apply for lots of different types of courses,"** says Sheila Byrne at Anglia Ruskin. "This shows lack of commitment and not knowing what you want to do."
- **"Use the 'entry profiles' on Ucas's website** to make sure that the course you have earmarked to put as a choice is actually the course you want to study," advises Daniel Cox, admissions officer at City University London. "We get a lot of people interested in biomedical engineering, thinking the course is medicine-based. In fact, it's on the design of medical equipment."

Where to apply?

Don't place too much authority on universities' glossy photos and grinning case studies – they're adverts. Check out academic credentials using Education Guardian's university tables, published today. Ask yourself what you want from a university; how far away from home do you want to be, and do you want to be in a big or small institution? At open days, ask the grumpiest-looking students their views: they're more likely to be honest. Check out extra-curricular activities, library facilities and bursary offerings, which differ according to university.

Some claim the application process is a marathon, not a sprint, and that universities consider all applications equally. Ignore that, and send your Ucas form as soon as possible. And don't restrict yourself to traditional institutions. Universities such as Birkbeck and the Open University offer part-time and flexible courses where you can work at the same time, while colleges are another, cheaper option.

- Nicola Rees, admissions tutor at Kingston University, says: **"Never be afraid to ask questions, however intrusive you think they may be.** Most unis have a live chat line for potential applicants staffed by current students or staff. Ask what are the rooms like, who will you share with, what facilities are there? An informed choice will be a better choice." She adds ominously: "Get your choice wrong and you will live to regret it."
- **"Apply early,"** advises Philip Davies, head of admissions at Bournemouth & Poole College. "Don't leave your application until the new year. The best places fill up quickly – make sure you are in the first tranche." Unsurprisingly, Davies also recommends looking beyond traditional universities. "Don't forget colleges, which can offer you the same quality degree as a university, but usually a lot cheaper."

Selling yourself

The Ucas statement – containing just basic facts about you plus your personal statement – is your precious tool to tell universities: pick me, one day I'll make a great addition to your alumni list. But don't go too far – avoid jokes at all costs. You can make yourself stand out before your application lands on their desk: universities are making a big effort with social media, and tapping into that flatters academic egos.

- **"Have a look at course blogs to get a feel for what's happening,"** says David McSherry, a lecturer at the University of Lincoln. "Comment on them. Find out who the academics who teach on the course are, follow them on Twitter, introduce yourself. That way you'll already have had a dialogue with them before you meet them in the flesh at an open day."
- Struggling to start your personal statement? **"The first paragraph should read like the first paragraph in a newspaper,"** says Ross Renton, head of recruitment at the University of Hertfordshire. "Grab the reader and get them interested in your story."
- **"Humour is a risky strategy – your taste may not be shared by the person reading the application,"** says John Wright, admissions tutor at the University of Surrey. "Aim to devote the majority of the personal statement to academic achievement and motivations, but do include evidence of leadership skills, and situations where you have overcome problems to achieve goals. Avoid bullet-point lists. Admissions tutors tire of reading bland statements like, 'I am fascinated by science'. Give examples of situations where your interest has been aroused."
- "One of the most common reasons we turn down applicants is where personal statements contain little or no information about an individual's reasons for studying a particular course," adds City University's Daniel Cox. "Include your aspirations once you have those letters after your name. **Don't use long-winded words to try to sound overly academic.** The personal statement is just that, personal, not a University Challenge answer."
- **"Plan, write drafts, ask someone to proofread your personal statement,"** advises Caroline McDonald, head of outreach at Birkbeck College. "Give concrete examples of things you've done to back up claims about your own abilities. Avoid self-help statements about how the course will help you to grow and develop, and management jargon. And don't mention hobbies and leisure activities unless they're specifically and obviously relevant."

At interview

Prepare as if you were applying for a job, consider what questions you'll be asked in advance, and constrain all accompanying family members.

- **"Be enthusiastic,** demonstrate a commitment to the discipline you're applying for, research the university and course and ask appropriate questions at interview," says Anglia's Byrne.
- Prepare for the obvious question. Newcastle's Lucy Backhurst draws on her personal experience just for you. "Think in advance about how you'd answer the question **'why do you want to be a doctor?'** **Don't say, 'I've just finished series 3 of House'.**"
- "If students come across as dominated by parents, we feel sorry for them, but it usually has a negative impact," says Anglia admissions tutor John Rayment.

Mature students

Portray the gap in your education as something positive – and act fast.

- **"Older students need to demonstrate that their skills and knowledge have prepared them for a demanding academic course,"** says Lee Hennessy at the University of Bath. He says courses such as the Access to [Higher Education](#) Diploma can help to do that.

- **"Think laterally,"** says Birkbeck's McDonald. "If you've been out of education for a while or don't have traditional qualifications, it's likely you have valuable transferable skills through work and life experience."

- **"Get your application in as soon as possible** – you will be competing with school-leavers who are coached to do so," adds Jo Midgley, director of admissions at the University of West England.

If the worst happens...

If you're not successful with your application to university, don't crawl under a rock. Since many university courses begin in January or other times throughout the year, don't assume you'll have to wait 12 months: shop around.

"Seek feedback from admissions tutors as soon as possible," says Warren Turner at London South Bank University. "Don't give up. Consider other routes into higher education – a foundation course, apprenticeship, work-based learning – before submitting another application."