

**Getting
in**

www.getting-in.com

 **A University Guide**



2012-13

**Choosing
A Course
and Getting In**

is produced
by the team
behind popular
university
applications
advice website

Getting-In.com

A University Guide: Choosing A Course And Getting In

Introduction

So you've decided that you want to go to university?

You're not alone. Every year, thousands of young people, school leavers and mature students make the decision to start their UCAS applications in the hope of securing a coveted place at one of the UK's respected universities or other HE (higher educational) institutions - and for many of them, it proves to be one of the best choices they'll ever make.

A university degree has been proven to give a great boost to a student's future career opportunities and earning potential over their lives. Those who leave school after A-Levels consistently earn less and score lower in career satisfaction and fulfilment surveys - so if you're hoping to get grades high enough for uni, make sure that you spend some time checking out **Getting-in.com's** dedicated exam preparation section. However, this isn't the only reason to go to uni. At university, you're likely to meet the best friends of your life: perhaps even a future husband, wife or partner. You might have heard some parents or teachers say that 'your school years are the best time of your life.' **Uni life is a chance to prove them wrong!**

At university, you'll spend your days with like-minded people: whether you're into graphic design or geology, you'll find people who are **just as passionate about your subject as you are**. University is also a chance to expand your horizons, and during their uni days many people discover the passions and interests that will occupy them for the rest of their lives. Most of all, university years are a chance to question your assumptions, decide on your own viewpoints, and develop your thinking. This comes from **two main factors** of the university experience:

1. University may well be the only point in your life when you have the opportunity to spend the majority of your time working out answers to the **questions that interest you**. Enjoy the chance to spend a whole week working out what you think of Karl Marx, *Pride and Prejudice* or the life cycle of a yeast cell: and to be rewarded for originality and understanding. People who have felt constricted by having to deliver the 'right answer' at school are often overjoyed to find out how much more free they are at university. Studying at degree level is a chance to work out what **you**, as an individual, really think.
2. For most people, going to university means moving out of their parents' houses. Even if you decide to go to university close to home and stay living with parents, other relatives or guardians, in your classes, seminars and at the uni bar you'll be meeting people from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of different opinions and characters. Starting a course at university means **moving out of your comfort zone**. Many people become aware of

aspects of life or of society that they've never experienced before: and most of them find this experience thrilling.

These two factors mean that young people who have taken the ideas and experiences of their childhood for granted find an opportunity to develop their thought; and that people who have been feeling stifled at home get to experience a way of studying and socialising outside of their comfort zones. On popular Channel 4 TV comedy *Fresh Meat*, which depicts the lives of six University of Manchester 'freshers' living in the same student house, one girl changes her name from "Melissa" to "Oregon," one reads a novel the whole way through for the first time, and the third decides to leave her two-and-a-half year relationship behind: some of the changes are helpful and some aren't, but in every case the chance for exploration that university offers is enormous. Whether big or small, the **exciting new challenges** you'll face at university will probably seem very important to you.

Some people decide to go to university because they want to **expand their horizons, learn more about their favourite subject**, or just **move away from home** - some people are more practical about it, being fully aware of the boosts to their **career prospects** and **earning opportunities** that a good degree can bring. Either way, those who've decide to pursue further study usually end up thinking of their time at university as a vitally important part of their lives.

The three (or sometimes four!) years at university are important in two ways. First of all, the years at university can be an enormously enjoyable experience in themselves. You'll **party, socialise, study and enjoy the freedom** of being a student: a time when you can live independently but free from most responsibilities. Even those who are going through their degrees while living at home or working at a full-time job, or who are parents themselves, enjoy the opportunities to study things that they're interested in and to meet new people. But the time that graduates have spent at university is also important as a launch pad for the rest of their lives. During your time at university, you can **start to figure out what you want** from your career, your relationships, your friendships and your spare time.

This guide will explain the process of applying to university, right from the first step of deciding what you want to study, all the way up to working out how you're going to pay your way. Because the majority of applicants to university are A-Level students in their late teens, this is the main focus of the book. However, a lot of different people - mature students, those taking non-A-Level qualifications or applying for non-traditional qualifications, part-time applicants or people with a specific career focus - need specific information, and at points where the mainstream information isn't helpful to them, I've tried to either give additional information, or point towards external resources.

The Case Studies show real-life situations which university applicants face, with some insight into what it really feels like to be going through the process of applying to - and **getting into** - university. The Insets give some extra information in the form of timelines, data tables, and explanations of some higher education terms. Don't feel that you have to read all the way through the Insets - this is information that it's good to have on hand, as a reference guide.

In addition, the chapters are all cross-referenced so that you don't have to read them in order. If you want to skip straight to interview advice, for example, just go straight to '**Chapter Five.**' If I refer to something elsewhere in the book, I'll tell you where it is so that you can go back and catch up.

If you feel confused by the university system in general - especially if you don't have many people in your family who've been to university, and you want to feel more comfortable within the field of higher education, there is useful general information in '**Chapter One,**' and some more specific information about the different types of universities, and histories of universities, in '**Chapter Three.**'

If you're thinking of applying to Oxford or Cambridge, there's a special section on making the decision - and on choosing a college from the universities' potentially confusing collegiate system - in '**Chapter Three,**' some information about the differences in application procedures in '**Chapter Four,**' and a guide to the interviews which often confuse or intimidate Oxbridge candidates in '**Chapter Five.**' Many personal statement and UCAS application assistance resources, including Getting-In, receive a particularly large volume of enquiries from hopeful prospective students searching for the competitive edge needed in Oxford and Cambridge applications.

There's a lot of general information in the book, and it's designed to give you a lot of overall background information, to help you feel well-informed while you're making your decision. However, there's also a lot of more precise information. The league tables in **Inset Four** are up-to-date and many students use them to get an idea of which universities offer the best teaching and the most prestige for each subject. You also might want to look at the comprehensive lists of universities that require special exams or interviews, which is provided in **Inset Seven.** '**Chapter Four**' can be kept at hand when you're actually submitting the application, as it gives a detailed timeline for UCAS candidates to follow. There's also a lot of detailed personal statement information here, as I know that personal statements are a major concern for many **Getting-In** readers. Of course, if you want any more information about personal statements, or on any other aspect of the application process, the **Getting-In** website has much more information available at www.getting-in.com.

Plus, for those trying to navigate the UK's complicated fee system, **'Chapter Six' of this book** aggregates information from various different sources to give you a checklist of considerations to think about when dealing with the financial side of university applications.

'Chapter One: All About University' will take you through a brief history of higher education, explaining some of the most important developments that have taken place, so that you can understand what people mean when they talk about the concept of 'going to university.' It'll explain why people go to university, how to decide whether it's the right choice for you, and discuss the effect of the global financial recession on young people's higher education decisions. **Will the recession affect your decision about university?**

'Chapter Two: Choosing The Subject That's Right For You' explains just how central your course subject is to your university experience - and gives advice to people who are confused about which degree might best match their personalities and interests. The **ten step checklist to choosing a subject** helps you choose based on your favourite academic areas, your future career plans, and your greatest passions. This section also points you towards some great online resources which can help you to make a decision.

'Chapter Three: Choosing The University That's Right For You' discusses the UK's different universities, explodes some of the myths around different types of institutions, and provides up-to-date league tables to help you pick the university where you'll spend three or four years. There's an explanation of how to get the most out of Open Days (Twitter, anyone?) and a section about Oxford and Cambridge colleges, for applicants who are considering one of these universities.

'Chapter Four: Navigating The Application Process' gives a detailed explanation of the steps you'll take as you progress through your application, explaining the processes behind jargon like Track, references, Clearing, Adjustment and pooling. There's a detailed application timeline, and a long section designed to guide you through producing your **personal statement**. **Chapter Four** also includes a discussion of the changes which UCAS is thinking of making to the current system, and the reasons why they're making them.

'Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work' explains how interviews and exams aren't just for Oxbridge candidates any more. As universities become more competitive, many students are being asked to do interviews, sit extra tests, or submit extra material alongside the standard UCAS application that all British applicants complete. This chapter gives an indication of which courses might ask you to do this, and some help on getting through these sometimes intimidating experiences. It's also worth remembering at this stage that for help with any exam preparation, including A-Levels and GCSEs, you can use **Getting-In's** dedicated revision section to help you out.

'Chapter Six: Fees, Finance and Funding' is a chapter dedicated to explaining the financial situation that students face, how it works, what you get out of it, and which different options are available. With recent reductions in university funding, massive increases in student fees, and new bursary schemes coming to light over the last year or two, there's a lot to take in - this chapter provides a digest.

That's a lot to get your head around!

But if you're thinking of applying to university, you know that you can't make the decisions too carefully. After all, if you choose and, perhaps more importantly, **get in** to the right course, university can be an experience you'll treasure for a lifetime.

Chapter One: All About University

Making the decision that you want to go to university is one of the biggest you'll ever face.

But you can't afford to breathe a sigh of relief once you've decided on a degree as the path forwards for you. You still have to work out how you can best maximise your chances of **getting in**.

After all, the places at the best universities can be fiercely competitive. At the same time, astronomical fee rises, and the several new colleges and higher education institutions which have sprouted up to cater for demand but which are rarely as rigorous or beneficial as traditional rivals, mean that there are more and more degrees which are not of a high enough quality to make them worth your while.

Navigating the vast world of higher education can be very confusing. It's often especially hard for prospective students whose parents haven't been to university, or who are studying in schools where relatively few students go on to university, and so don't have teachers who are experienced in giving higher education advice and support. It's no wonder that every year, thousands of students turn to advice from the media, official organisations such as UCAS, and supportive advisory businesses such as **Getting-In**, whose special university and course profiles are designed to help students make their decisions.

Case Study: David, 40, says, 'When I was trying to decide where to go to university and what to study, there was almost no information available to me. This was before every household and school had the internet, and because not many people from my school went to university, my teachers couldn't give me much advice. I didn't have a clue how to present myself at interview or write a personal statement either. I was happy during my time at the University of Brighton, but I always wonder whether I could have got into a more prestigious university if I'd had a bit more information available to me. I'm amazed by how much info the web offers to college students now!'

Although many students don't realise it, the world of higher education has changed a lot over the last 10-15 years. This is why even people whose parents or teachers are experienced in the university system may still be getting out-of-date advice, and can end up hopelessly confused. If you're 17 or 18 and have parents who went to university, they probably dealt with the system in the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s. **And things have changed a lot since then.** Even teachers and careers advisors are often a little out of touch when it comes to what life is really like for a student in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This is why students often prefer collaborative - often internet-based - organisations which regularly talk with current students and recent graduates about the real situation.

Who Goes To University?

In 1997, when then-Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a 'grand plan' for upping the number of university students, he stated an aim of having 50% of young school-leavers going to university by 2010. Like most government targets, that figure hasn't been hit; but it's got extremely close, with 45% of school-leavers going to university as a natural first step forward into the market, and into adult life. If you take a look at **Getting-In's** jobs and internships section, you'll see that the majority of jobs now ask for undergraduate degrees.

This means that competition for places is fierce, but also that when you do go to university, you'll be taking part in a rite of passage which young people all over the country are experiencing with you. The cast of Channel 4's *Fresh Meat* represent a small sample of some of the broad diversity of young people going to university in 2011:

- The 'posh' public school boy who wants to party hard at university - J.P.
- The student studying towards a qualification for her chosen career of Dentistry - Josie
- The girl putting herself through an English degree with the RAF, in order to enter the Force at a higher level - Vod
- The 'geeky' enthusiast who loves Geology for its own sake - Howard
- The ambitious future academic, who hopes to join the university's English department one day - Oregon
- The confused student still trying to decide between Geology and Drama - Kingsley

What brings all these people together is their wish to make the most out of university, both in work and in play. Being at university with a diverse group of people, all of whom share the desire to live the 'university experience,' is a wonderful way to discover things about yourself and about others.

The diverse group of *Fresh Meat* characters, all with different attitudes to life and future plans, are the programme makers' attempts to showcase a representative group of British students in 2011. 50 or 60 years ago, things could have been quite different. It's possible that of the group, only J.P. and Oregon, both from moneyed backgrounds, would have been able to have access to university. Back then, there were considerably fewer universities in the UK (In 1960, only 30 British universities existed - whereas now there are 165!). This meant, of course, that far fewer students had the opportunity to go to them and to earn a degree. Even people who held jobs which nowadays might require a university degree - such as nurses, secretaries, department store managers or bank clerks - often did not have the chance to pursue higher education.

Unfortunately, the smaller number of university places did not always go solely to the brightest people. The vast majority of university students had attended exclusive and expensive public schools, even though only a very small proportion of students had taken their A-Levels at public schools: the disproportionate numbers of public school students at university in those days is generally held to demonstrate that the applications and admissions procedures for universities were not always fair. University was often seen as something that only 'posh' people could take advantage of; meaning that in many schools, the option of going on to university wasn't even discussed. Some universities were extremely prejudiced. Many Oxford and Cambridge colleges, for example, only started to allow female undergraduates to enter in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

However, as time went on, and the rigid British class system started to become more flexible, both governments and universities felt that students should have easier access to university courses: no matter what their backgrounds. All kinds of schools - comprehensive schools and those with a high proportion of less wealthy students, as well as private, public and grammar schools - were told to encourage students to go to university. Universities tried to make student life more friendly for everyone, with Student Union representatives for female, black or Asian, LGBT and international students; offered a wider variety of courses; and worked to make their admissions processes fairer.

Case Study: Pete, 54, says, 'When I applied to study Physics at the University of Durham in 1974, I went to an interview and was asked, 'Which position do you row in?' I had been to an urban comprehensive school in Billericay, Essex, and had never been in a rowing boat! I felt that I was being judged on my background, not just on my academic work, which I didn't think was fair. But things have changed: my daughters both went to good universities and got in on the strength of their A-Level results and personal statements, without assumptions being made about their social backgrounds.'

Nowadays, most universities judge applications without an interview, so they have no way of knowing things like the student's race or social background. They are usually very careful to make sure that they do not judge prospective students on irrelevant information about their backgrounds. As a result, more and more bright students began to go to university. There were so many students that many new universities and higher education courses sprung up in order to cater for the growing demand.

University may have once been the province of only the richest and most privileged students, but nowadays it is open to everybody who can secure the grades to gain access to at least one of the UK's 165 universities and higher education colleges. Many jobs now require a degree, and there has been an increase in vocational courses available. Once, students only went to university in order to study abstract, theoretical courses such as History, Mathematics, or Classics: the focus was always on how much the student could learn, not on the usefulness of what was learned. Although there

are still plenty of these traditional courses for the students who want to take them up, there are now also courses in subjects such as Business Studies, Pharmaceuticals, or Advertising which are dedicated to preparing students for a specific working field or career path.

Many of these courses are administered by former **polytechnics** (see **Inset Two**), while others are taken at higher education colleges which work together with universities to grant degrees to people who have completed three-year courses there. Somebody like *Fresh Meat's* Josie, who is studying Dentistry as the first step on a career path she's already decided on, may have gone to a polytechnic rather than a university if she'd been applying in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s.

These were colleges where young people looking to improve their career prospects could get higher education certificates in more vocational subjects such as Carpentry and Nursing, and in technical subjects such as Electronic Engineering. Nowadays, Josie's studying at a university, contributing to a larger and more diverse student population than universities had before the 1990s. Nowadays, most young people looking for specific career paths will go to university, then use graduate placements and internships, like those found in **Getting-In's** jobs and internship section, rather than completing vocational qualifications.

Inset Two: Polytechnics

The term 'polytechnics', or 'ex-polytechnics', refers to those institutions which became universities after 1992, under the Further and Higher Education Act. Most of them were created in the mid-1960s, following the 'Russell Report' which recommended an increase in the number of universities; however, some date back to the nineteenth century, and were created at roughly the same time as the London universities. Polytechnics were places which taught courses on both academic and vocational subjects, but with a definite emphasis on applied education for work. Typical subjects included Carpentry, Town Planning, or Law. Many of the most regarded scientific subjects nowadays - such as Bio-Chemical Engineering, Medical Physics, or Statistics - were only taught at polytechnics; but these institutions were often looked down on by a university system which favoured the humanities, arts and social sciences. They also accepted students with lower marks at A-Level or equivalent than the traditional universities did. The term 'the Binary Divide' was used to describe the difference between universities and polytechnics.

Polytechnics were different to universities in other ways: they tended to have a strong focus on undergraduate teaching, with little research done by postgraduates, and they did not have the power to award degrees, although many 'teamed up' with a local university so that their students could receive degrees. Others handed out different types of qualifications - notably BTECs, which you can still study at school or at FE colleges, and 'CNAAs' awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards - welcomed by employers but not by postgraduate researchers.

Nowadays, many higher education colleges work in the same way, awarding some of their own qualifications and offering degrees in collaboration with a nearby university.

Polytechnics existed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; in Scotland, very similar places were known as 'central institutions.' Some further education colleges also used the term 'polytechnic.'

Former polytechnics are often referred to as 'new universities,' although they have had university status for nineteen years! Most polytechnics changed their names when they gained university status in 1992, often by simply adding 'University' to their names: for instance, Portsmouth Polytechnic became the University of Portsmouth. However, when there was another university already in the town, the polytechnics had to get creative. Many of them added 'Metropolitan' ('town') to the names of the cities, such as Manchester Metropolitan or Leeds Metropolitan; others incorporated an element of the local landscape into their names, such as Nottingham Trent (named for the river Trent). Anglia Polytechnic, which has campuses in Cambridge and Chelmsford, adopted the name of a cultural icon, Victorian aesthete John Ruskin, to become Anglia Ruskin University. However, Anglia only made this name change in 2005. Before that, it was the only university to retain the term 'polytechnic' in its title.

Polytechnics have developed in many different ways. Some, such as Kingston University or Middlesex University, have expanded their research elements to become known centres for academic research. Some have continued to specialise in applied subjects, and become very highly ranked in the provision of these degrees. As you can see in **Inset Four**, the University of Surrey was ranked by the *Complete University Guide* as the best university in the UK to study Hospitality, Leisure, Tourism & Recreation (all one category), and the third best for General Engineering (it also ranks fifth best in four other categories!)

Meanwhile, neither Kingsley, Vod or Oregon are entering university directly from school. Oregon has taken a 'gap year' in Thailand, something which has been common among university applicants for a while. The other two face slightly difficult circumstances: Kingsley has been acting as carer for his sick mother for the last year, while Vod is being sponsored by the RAF throughout her degree. Taking up an undergraduate course after a delay, or in the middle of a career, is becoming more and more common, and the programme makers of *Fresh Meat* needed to represent this fact.

The diversity of undergraduate student bodies is growing partly as a result of the growing diversity in courses - partly the result, as I mentioned earlier, of polytechnics and other higher educational institutions becoming universities, partly because of the rise in vocation-based degrees, and partly because as society itself gets more diverse and complex, courses in subjects such as Gender Studies, Hebrew Literature, Creative Writing or Environmental Studies become more common.

This diversity in different types of courses available means more and more people are thinking of university as an option. It also means that mature students are more likely to be enrolled in universities: after having been in the working world for some years, job-holders often find that their lack of a degree stands between them and a promotion. Certain employers, notably the civil service and public sector organisations, have a rigid system which does not allow non-graduates to be promoted above a certain level, while employees in other professions - such as chemists, catering workers, or clerical staff - need the knowledge that a degree provides in order to really rise in their fields. Job-seekers, too, will often feel that their chances of finding a job, or a position that's more fulfilling, prestigious or better-paid, could be improved by holding a degree.

There are also people who enrol on university courses as mature students simply to learn more in subjects which they feel they neglected in school, or as a hobby. These students often wish to study part-time. They may do degrees in enjoyable, often artistic subjects, such as Creative Writing, Film Studies, or French Language, as a way to have an interest outside of work. They often enjoy meeting people by using **Getting-In's** social aspect and classified buy-and-sell book ads - and take advantage of **Getting-In's** special student deals while they socialise with the new friends they make on their course!

Case Study: Elizabeth, 35, says, 'I'm a psychiatrist 'by trade,' with an undergraduate degree and a medical doctorate from University College, London (UCL). I love my job, but my days are pretty stressful and I often need to unwind. After taking time out to have my little girl, I decided to go part-time - and realised how much I missed learning. I was always a very 'geeky' girl at school! So now I'm doing a second undergraduate degree in Ancient History at Birkbeck University. I'm much older than most of my fellow students, but I'm really getting a kick out of learning new things.'

For the purpose of this book I will mainly concentrate on the most common type of prospective student: the student who has worked hard, using **Getting-in.com's** exam preparation section, to complete his or her AS-Levels, and now wants to use the resource to work out which university course to apply to, and how to **get in**.

The Changing Face of University

The institution of a 'university' is one of the most ancient ones in our society. Universities have been producing great philosophers, writers, artists, rulers and scientists for thousands of years. Some important principles within modern life and politics were developed within universities, such as academic freedom, a thirst for knowledge, and an attempt to analyse preconceptions. The University of Bologna first wrote academic freedom - the ability to form opinions without referring to politics or trying to please powerful people, such as popes or kings - into its charter in the year 1155!

Although in Britain we tend to think of universities as being a ‘Western’ institution, they are believed to have originated in Arab North Africa; however, for over a thousand years they have been a vital part of European culture. But it hasn’t always been a smooth road. This timeline illustrates some of the important dates in the history of universities.

Inset One: A Timeline of Universities

- 859** - Establishment of what the *Guinness Book of World Records* names as the oldest university in the world, the University of Al-Karaouine/ Al-Qarawiyyin, an Islamic madrasa in Fes, Morocco.
- 1088** - Establishment of the University of Bologna, the first European university. Originally, a law school (offering ‘vocational’ law degrees!).
- 1155/1158** - The University of Bologna, Italy, adopts an academic charter guaranteeing a travelling scholar unhindered passage in the interests of his education - an event usually referred to as the origin of ‘academic freedom.’
- 1160 (ish)** - Establishment of the University of Paris; which many English scholars attended.
- 1167** - Following a ban on English scholars going to France to study, the University of Oxford is established: the UK’s first university.
- 1209** - Break away scholars leave the University of Oxford, cross the country and set up a new university in Cambridge.
- 1413** - Establishment of St Andrews University, Scotland’s first university (Scotland at this point is not part of the UK).
- 1488** - Europe boasts 29 universities (though England still only has two!).
- 1836** - UCL (University College London) and King’s College London decide to unite as the University of London. Many other London institutions soon join.
- 1839** - Education Department established within the UK government.
- 1845** - Establishment of Northern Ireland’s first university, the Queen’s University of Belfast.
- 1848** - Queen’s College, in London, established to teach women.
- 1878** - London University opens all degrees to women (London University consists of all the main London universities, including UCL, LSE, Imperial, SOAS, Queen Mary, Birkbeck, etc...).
- 1880** - Establishment of the federal Victoria University, uniting what would become the universities of Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool.
- 1893** - Foundation of the federal university of Wales, the first Welsh university
- 1946** - Barlow Report recommends more places for science students be made available in UK universities.

- 1956 - Selected technical and further education colleges updated to the title of 'Colleges of Advanced Technology'.
- 1962 - Education Act requires Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide students with grants for living costs and tuition fees.
- 1963 - Robbins Report recommends immediate expansion of universities, giving all Colleges of Advanced Technology university status.
- 1964 - The University of Strathclyde (first founded in 1796) receives the Royal Charter as the UK's first technological 'civic' university.
- 1966 - Establishment of the first polytechnics, and of the CNAA (Council for National Academic Awards), which assessed the 'degrees' awarded by polytechnics.
- 1990 - The first 'top-up' loans are introduced for higher education students, administered by LEAs.
- 1992 - Under the *Further and Higher Education Act*, the Privy Council is made responsible for approving the use of the word 'university' in an institution's title, and many former polytechnics become universities.
- 1998 - Student Loans Act transfers provision of student loans to the private sector; Teaching and Higher Education Act abolishes maintenance grants for all and requires students to contribute to tuition fees.
- 2004 - Universities permitted to charge variable fees, instead of one universal fee
- 2007 - The component institutions of the University of Wales (the universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea) become independent.

Competition

The applications and admissions process is now a **lot fairer** than it used to be, with many organisations - including UCAS - working to make university **accessible for all**. But as more and more people make the decision to apply to university, the competition is also a **lot tougher**. Some of the best academic universities might turn away 10 applicants to a course for every one they admit. This is the ratio for Bristol's English undergraduate degree, but it's not the most extreme example: LSE's coveted International Relations course only has a 3.4% success rate, meaning that for every hundred people who apply, 96.6% will be turned away.

So the good news is that new applicants to university no longer have to cope with too much prejudice on the basis of social background or former place of education, and often don't have to worry about interviews - but the bad news is that competition for university places has become a good deal more fierce. Every year, more and more students get turned away and have to go through Clearing, or end up without a place at all. At the end of the 2011 admissions process, 20,9000 students were left without a place.

Even many very good students fail to get a place, because students with a string of 'A's or 'A*'s generally apply only to very competitive courses, and each one may reject them. Sometimes when an applicant with a lot of predicted 'A's or 'A*'s ends up in Clearing or without a place, there is an outcry, and when the applicant is from a state school and has applied to Oxford, Cambridge, or a traditionally exclusive 'red brick' university, the lack of an offer is often blamed on prejudice. It's impossible to know how much this is true. But it's a sad fact that certain courses have much fewer places available than there are applicants who've gained three or four 'A's (or, since the introduction of the 'A*' grade in 2008, at least one 'A*') than there are certain places. There's no doubt about it: the best university courses in the UK are **extremely competitive**.

As the exam results, personal statement, and - for some universities - the interview are the only places in which you can make your mark, it's extremely important that these are **as impressive as possible**. Exam results are extremely important: when a university or college asks for a certain predicted grade score - for instance AAB - they really mean that. It's no use trying to **get in** if you're predicted a ABB; your application may well simply be dismissed out of hand, perhaps without even being read. And although more and more A-Level students earn higher grades each year, thanks to their hard work and smart use of resources such as **Getting-In's** exam preparation section, universities quickly respond to what some people see as 'grade inflation' by upping their requirements. In the 1960s or 1970s, even the best universities such as Oxford or Cambridge would only require perhaps one A grade at A-Level: in 2009, the University of Cambridge announced that it would become the first university to explicitly ask for the new 'A*' grade in its offers. Many admissions tutors, especially those overseeing applications for Maths- or Science-related courses, will ask for UMS marks which demonstrate that the candidate is in the top 10% or 5% of A grade examinees, at the least.

But this book isn't about how to get the grades for university. Like **Getting-In**, this book is designed to show how hopeful A-Level and AS-Level students can maximise their chances of **getting in**, through choosing the right course and the right university for them, submitting a truly stellar personal statement, and performing brilliantly at interview if needed. Every year, many people with brilliant A-Level results or predicted grades are turned away from the universities of their choice, not because they're not bright enough, but simply because they don't know how to present themselves, or to 'match make' themselves with a course.

Some hopeful prospective university students have access to great teachers or careers advisors, or to parents who know about the university system. These advisors are brilliant assets, and can be of the greatest help. However, each student's access to high quality advice is something of a lottery. And for those who don't have the good fortune to have truly expert teachers or advisors available, this book will give you some valuable tips. It will also direct you to other sources of knowledge,

including the **Getting-In** website and the resources which it contains. Remember that if after reading this book, you need any more information on:

- university profiles;
- course profiles;
- how to pass A-Levels and GCSEs;
- jobs and internships;
- buying and selling university equipment;
- special student deals,

www.GettingIn.co.uk is there for you during this competitive economic time.

Recession and University Applicants

Following the recent ‘fee hike’ (which I’ll discuss in ‘**Chapter Six: Fees, Finance and Funding**’), the number of applicants for university places dropped for the first time in 2011. Before this, the number of students applying to university each year consistently increased, slowly building up to 45%. In 2011, though, UCAS reported a drop in applicant numbers from students within the UK (*i.e.*, born in the UK and so making their applications through UCAS) from 157,116 in 2010 to 133,357 in 2011. This represents a drop of over 15%.

That’s a lot of numbers! Essentially, these figures mean that fewer students applied to university in 2011, when most universities charged £9,000 per year in course fees, than applied in 2010, when most universities charged just over £3,000. This isn’t really surprising. But many commentators have pointed out that the increase probably doesn’t represent fewer students enrolling in university overall, as there was a ‘glut’ of students applying in 2010. Why did so many apply in 2010? In order to ‘**get in**’ before the fee rise. Fewer people took gap years, and mature students made their minds up quickly to apply to courses they’d been considering before the fees went up!

One exception to the drop in applicants in 2011, there was an 11% rise in applications from outside the UK. That’s a trend that means you’re more likely to meet fun people from all over the world - anywhere from France to Fiji to Florida! - during your time at uni.

This drop in applicants sounds as if it would give you a better chance of **getting in** to your chosen course, university or college. And it may well have that effect, especially for those enrolling on vocational courses: many potential ‘competitors’ may well decide that the course is no longer ‘worth’ the promotion it could have led to. Similarly, in the current gloomy job market, many people who would have done courses which they’re lukewarm about are panicking and choosing to go straight into work instead.

If you're reading this in early 2012, the drop in applicants may well give you an advantage in your mission of **getting into** your chosen course or institution, by decreasing the competition. However, this means that if you're dithering over whether to go to university, you should grab the bull by the horns now if you want to take advantage of this decreased competition - because prior history suggests that it won't last long.

In 2006, university fees rose by roughly the same amount that they rose in 2011: they trebled, from £1,000 per year to £3,000 per year. Many students and prospective students were aghast, and applications to attend university or higher education colleges made through UCAS fell by 4.5%. However, in 2007 they rose by 7.1%, more than making up for the fall the preceding year. In 2008, the number of students making applications rose by 10%, and continued to rise in 2009 and 2010. This precedent suggests that it's likely that, once the initial shock of £9,000 annual fees is over, competition will continue to get tougher in further years.

So in many ways, this year is the perfect time to apply to university, if you're already considering it.

The question remains: which course should you apply for?

Aim For The Stars

If you fall into one of these categories:

- Your **heart is set** on studying at one of the best universities - whether that's for prestige, or because of your love of learning
- You **know that you want** the kind of graduate job - lawyer, teacher, investment banker - that can only be achieved with a good degree from a respected university
- You **love your subject** so much that you're considering becoming a professional academic, or at least doing post-graduate work

you're sure to find competition for university places very tough even during the recession. This applies even during years with a drop in the total of new applicants.

Why?

Because if you fall into one of those categories, you will want to go to university no matter what. And although fees are high, anybody *can* afford them with the Student Loans Company. You won't

have to start paying that £9,000 per year back until you're earning over £21,000. (This arrangement is explained at greater length in 'Chapter Six: Fees, Finance and Funding.')

And if *you* still want to go to university, so do thousands of others. The competition at **Oxford and Cambridge colleges, Russell Group universities, and other prestigious institutions** is still tough.

The recession provides one very important reason to **get into** as good a university as you possibly can. The times are gone when being a graduate, with a degree from any university or higher education college in the country, guaranteed young people a good job. Nowadays, in order to stand out in the job market, you're going to need a degree which is either from one of the country's most prestigious universities, or which incorporates truly outstanding work experience opportunities or teaching of professional skills. So that personal statement, interview demeanour, and teacher's or employer's reference will have to be as good as you can possibly make them. All over the country, students are realising that lazily aiming for their 'fall back' courses isn't wise. In return for the larger investment of £9,000 per year, you'll want a really useful degree to show for it.

In summary, in 2012 it's more important than ever to **get into** a 'good' course, for two reasons:

1. Rising fees mean that you'll be paying off your degree for a long time. You want to make sure that the degree is 'worth it.' As I've said, factors such as enjoyment of your degree, and the ability to explore your passions, are important. However, many people applying to university do find themselves wondering whether they can justify the minimum cost of £27,000, and earn it back through improved earning power.
2. There are a lot of unemployed graduates out there looking for jobs already - more than ever before in the UK. Around 9% of graduates are still completely unemployed 6 months after graduation, and many more are 'under-employed,' working in bars or shops. Simply having a degree doesn't mean you'll walk into a 'graduate job' when you graduate. At the moment, **there are more graduates than there are graduate jobs**. You need to make sure that your degree teaches you enough relevant skills, or sounds impressive enough, to make your CV stand out on a busy employer's desk. So take a look at **Getting-In's** course and university profiles to find out which degrees will really cut the mustard with the people who could be signing your paychecks in a few years.

Case Study: Lauren, 22, says, 'I enjoyed school and got the occasional A and A, but I was never particularly ambitious: I just wanted a fairly well-paid nine to five job. It was more important to me to stay near my mum and my boyfriend, so I did my Psychology degree at the ex-polytechnic near me. I knew lots of people who'd gone there and easily got good graduate jobs afterwards! But when I graduated in 2010, I found that interviews were really competitive. At the last interview I went to, the girl who got the job had a double first from Durham. I'm still hoping to find a*

graduate job, but I really wish I'd pushed myself to get the best qualifications when I had the chance.'

But what *is* a good course?

Mickey Mouse Degrees?

Especially since the growth of new universities in the UK, and the huge increase in people applying to and studying at them, some courses have been considered 'useless,' or '**Mickey Mouse**' courses. The first prominent figure in the UK to use the term 'Mickey Mouse' to describe a weak university course was Margaret Hodge, then-Higher Education Minister. In 2003, she denounced courses such as Tourism Studies and Media Studies as irrelevant and not useful. However, she faced a backlash and was subsequently proved wrong by employers, who eagerly employed tourism and media graduates in hotels and media sales positions.

Degrees can be labelled 'Mickey Mouse courses' for a variety of reasons; and not all of these reasons are fair. For instance,

- Many **older people**, who dealt with the university system when it was very exclusive and admitted only a small percentage of young people, do not appreciate the worth of **more vocational degrees**. They tend to think that a degree should only deal with traditional academic disciplines such as languages, 'hard' sciences like physics, maths or chemistry, and the study of literature, politics, and history, *etc.* Therefore, many people with this background believe that a university course primarily designed to prepare students for a specific job market - such as Media Studies, Sports Science, or Hotel Management - are not 'real' courses. This was probably the thought process behind Margaret Hodge's dismissal of 'Mickey Mouse courses.' However, as university degrees become valuable to people working in a whole range of career fields at many different levels, these degrees can be very useful. For instance, an aspiring P.E. teacher would do very well to study Sports Science before taking the teacher's PGCE postgraduate qualification; and if you take a look at job boards, you'll see that many employers specifically request this kind of vocational degree. It's quite common for media sales positions to be open only to graduates in Media Studies, Marketing or Communications; which have all been referred to as 'Mickey Mouse degrees' in the past, before employers, students and politicians began to understand their true value.

Case Study: Noah, 27, says, 'I wasn't too academic at school, but my best subject was P.E. I have three little brothers and used to help out at my local youth club, so when my teacher suggested that I go into education it seemed like a good idea. Sadly, I thought that to be a teacher you had to do a degree in something like English, Maths or Science. But I soon found out that I could do a

degree in anything, and learn my basic skills as part of a PGCE course afterwards. With my love of sports, there was only one answer: Sports Performance and Coaching. I studied at the University of Plymouth, and learned some water sports down at the beach while I was there! Now I love coaching kids at the secondary school I teach at, and I'm planning a field trip down to Plymouth to teach some of the keen ones how to surf!

- At the other end of the scale, many **employers and commentators** see subjects which are **too obscure or academic** as 'Mickey Mouse degrees.' This tends to be because arts and social science degrees tend to focus on analysing and describing what's going on in human behaviour and art: and as more and more social science academics focus on modern-day life, their work can seem trivial. Ariel Dorfman's *How To Read Donald Duck* was derided by some of these people as a 'Mickey Mouse' project of no real value. It even refers to a Disney character like Mickey! But in fact Dorfman is a world-renowned academic, and the book was a very complicated exploration of colonialism within popular culture. Tabloids particularly like to make fun of this kind of analytical learning, so take what they say with a pinch of salt. Many undergraduates would love to study under Dorfman, and postgraduate admissions tutors would see working with him as a sign of quality in a candidate.
- Lastly, the 'Mickey Mouse' character of some courses is **exaggerated** because the element which is seen as irrelevant or 'too easy' is only a small part of the course. Staffordshire University suffered from this exaggeration when it was ridiculed in tabloid newspapers for offering 'David Beckham studies' as a degree course. Actually, a class on the way in which football culture reflects British culture was offered as just one of many classes and modules taken up as an option by social science and sociology students - and David Beckham was only referred to in one lesson! Social Science and Sociology are, of course, both very well-respected disciplines, both academically and in the job market.

So if somebody who doesn't know much about your course laughs at it and calls it a 'Mickey Mouse course' (another derogatory term is 'a degree in underwater basket weaving') you can usually ignore them, as long as you're satisfied yourself. Times change quickly. Although the term 'Mickey Mouse course' wasn't around in 1828 (long before Walt Disney's cartoon rodent came into existence!), many academics, politicians and journalists derided University College London (UCL) for offering a degree in English Literature. Back then, the study of literature in one's own language was seen as a ridiculously easy and irrelevant subject, not worthy of a degree award. Nowadays, of course, some of the world's most respected academics work in this field, and second-hand books for the subject are bought and sold all the time using **Getting-In's** classified app.

Having said this, it is true that some courses are offered as a trendy way to catch prospective students' eyes, or as 'easy options' for students who feel that they ought to go to university but

don't want to work too hard. Generally speaking, you know a degree course is worthwhile if it has **dedicated academics** working on it **and/or** it directly relates to a **career field**.

The vast, vast majority of courses offered by British universities and higher education colleges meet one of these criteria. So don't worry too much.

However, although most courses are worthwhile to *someone*, as a prospective student you need to find out which course is **worthwhile for you**.

Chapter Two: Choosing The Subject That's Right For You

Any advisor worth his or her salt will tell you that A-Level students trying to decide on a course should **start with the subject, not with the university**. That's why www.Getting-in.com offers dedicated details and profiles on each **course available**, not just profiles of universities and educational institutions. After all, you don't want to do a subject you don't like for three or four years, just because you really wanted to go to one place! Many people who think 'university-first' get tripped up quickly when they start to investigate their subjects.

Oxford and Cambridge are particularly notorious for getting ambitious students confused in this way, because they like to 'do things differently.' As entrance to these universities is so sought after, the academics designing the course don't have to worry about making it seem appealing to a broad base of students: they know that they won't be short of prospective students. For this reason, their courses are often very idiosyncratic: the Natural Sciences course at Cambridge, for example, is structured in a way that means that students must study Chemistry, Physics *and* Biology. Unfortunately, this means that students who love theoretical physics and hate the idea of lab work are setting themselves up for unhappiness if they go ahead and apply for this course anyway, just to get the prestige and personal satisfaction of a Cambridge place. Similarly, Oxford won't accept Philosophy, Politics or Economics students unless they can prove that they're passionate about **all three** of these subjects, to gain entry to the highly competitive PPE course.

And Oxford and Cambridge aren't the only institutions which have a **limited choice of courses**. Many prospective university students dislike the idea of being 'tied down' to a limited range of university choices because the subject they want to do isn't widely taught - for instance, those who want to do South Asian studies, gender studies or veterinary science - and end up going for a 'second-best' subject at a 'first-choice' university. Many students, sadly, end up studying a subject they're lukewarm about because the subject they truly love wasn't available at an institution in the city they want to live in.

But this is often a bad decision to make. The most common reason for students dropping out is that they aren't engaged with the course, aren't enjoying it, or realise that it isn't right for them. In a worst case scenario, dropping out means losing a lot of money in fees, and setting your entrance into the job market back by years.

Signing up for a university course means signing up for three (or in some cases, four) years of reading books and scholarly articles about a certain subject, following all the latest developments made by academics in that field, sitting through long lectures on it and discussing it at least once a week with a tutor or fellow students. And unlike at school, simply memorising the facts isn't enough. You'll be expected to have well-developed and complicated opinions about what you've

read and what you've found out about. So you'd better get used to using **Getting-In's** classified buy-and-sell app and deals section, because you're going to be buying a lot of books!

So if you're only at university in the first place for the sake of Durham's prestige, Bristol's dubstep scene or Southampton's sailing team, you're going to get very bored of the subject you're stuck in!

That's why, in this book, '**Chapter Two: Choosing The Subject That's Right For You**' comes before '**Chapter Three: Choosing The University That's Right For You.**'

What's more, if you're lukewarm about the subject, your personal statement will seem lukewarm to those reading it. However skilful you are at writing the statement, and however good the advice you get is, it's very hard to fake a passion for a topic. And admissions tutors are looking for new students whose faces in lectures are going to show how interested they are. Whether their subject is Medieval History, Biogenetics or the American constitution, they'll want students who are just as passionate about it as they are.

This trait of admissions tutors - to choose the most passionate students over those who may have great grades, but don't seem invested in the subject - can work to your advantage. As long as you can demonstrate **great enthusiasm for and knowledge of your subject**, you shouldn't be scared of applying to prestigious and competitive courses. If you've been kicked out of your local Waterstones for spending hours reading through *all* their classic novels, or you spend a lot of time imagining that you're Jeremy Paxman, quizzing David Cameron on the philosophy behind the 'Big Society' - and if this comes through in your personal statement and interview - admissions tutors will value you over someone who can get good grades effortlessly, but doesn't seem to really care.

So don't be afraid to follow the subject you *really* want to **live and breathe for three years**.

Choosing A Subject

Most students will have to pick a subject to study at university by Christmas of their 'A2' year at the latest. Although some students go for 'joint honours' degrees, these are comparatively rare, and most universities in England and Wales will require a student to be passionate about his or her chosen subject on the personal statement. The 'joint-honours' system allows students to study two different subjects in tandem. Alternatively, you could do some close research into the courses you're considering to see how much flexibility it offers with regards to modules you're allowed to take. For instance, English students at Cambridge only have choice over their modules in their final year, whereas universities with a strong interdisciplinary focus may allow students to choose from modules within different departments right from the beginning of their degrees.

The American modular system, allowing students to delay choosing a 'major' and a 'minor' subject until they're well into their degrees, doesn't exist to the same extent in the UK. However, if flexibility between subjects is important to you, you may want to opt for a university north of the border. The Scottish university system differs fairly substantially from the English and Welsh systems. It's explained fully in **Inset Three: The Scottish System** below.

Inset Three: The Scottish System

The Scottish universities sometimes work in a different way: they typically offer degrees which take four years to complete, not three. Sometimes, students are permitted to enter straight into the second year ('second-year entry') after taking special higher-level exams.

Many Scottish universities also offer the chance to take courses in many different disciplines in your first two years, and specialise in the third and fourth years, in a system that's similar to the American 'credits' system. You still apply for and are accepted for one subject, but once you get to university you're obligated to take two extra subjects of your choice (these are usually in roughly the same area, e.g. humanities, sciences, arts or social sciences). The only exception to this rule is made for students taking 'vocational' subjects such as Medicine, where more ground must be covered in the time provided.

'Extra' subjects are applied for at the beginning of first year and allocated through a lottery. Though it's officially possible to study all subjects as 'extra' subjects, some courses such as English Literature are usually so over-subscribed that it's pretty hard to get a place on them if they're not your primary subject. You'll continue with one of the 'extra' subjects in second year before making your mind up - this time for real! - for third year.

Not all Scottish universities use this system, but most of the 'ancient universities' (*i.e.*, those which were never polytechnics) do; including Edinburgh and St Andrews. For more information on the specific universities, and specific courses, which use the 'extra subject' system, see **Getting-In's** comprehensive list of university and subject profiles on www.Getting-in.com.

English, Welsh and Northern Irish students are eligible to enter Scottish universities, and are supposed to receive equal consideration. However, there are plenty of rumours claiming that this doesn't happen, and that Scottish students in fact get preferential treatment due to nationalist feeling within the universities. No one (except the admissions tutors!) really knows just how true this is - but if you're not Scottish, it's probably not wise to select more than one Scottish university as a choice on your UCAS Track form.

Of course, although most universities require you to think about your subject above all else not every 17 year old AS student *knows* which subject he or she is passionate about.

And if you're one of the people who hasn't made up his or her mind yet, this chapter might have seemed a little daunting so far!

Hopefully, you haven't been put off too much. The truth is that if you start thinking about these things early, you should be able to work out what you want in plenty of time for your application. The way to get into trouble is to wait until a couple of weeks before the UCAS Track form is due in to decide on the subject you want to do. If you start thinking about it **early** - as soon as you get started in sixth-form, if not before - you'll be able to work out what you want much better.

Sixth-form is a stressful time, when everything is changing. People are working out what they want in all sorts of areas: relationships, friendships, hobbies, and of course, future degree courses and careers. All this can be overwhelming. And during your AS year, working out which degree you'd like to do in a couple of years' time can seem a lot less urgent, and less interesting, than working out whether you should go for the 'bad boy' or the 'boy next door,' planning your eighteenth birthday party, or getting your band their first gig.

That's why this chapter will give you some tips on how to get over the confusing array of different degree subjects, and how to choose the one which is **right for you**.

Using Current Studies to Make a Choice

For some people, choosing a subject is easy: it happens as soon as they're in sixth-form. The wider range of subjects available at sixth-form - such as Politics, Media Studies, or Psychology - introduces them to the subject they really care about. For others, the narrowing of the subjects they study, as they go from a school day spent learning eight or nine different subjects to a sixth-form day spent learning three or four AS subjects, makes them realise which one stands out for them.

This can be especially true for those taking BTEC courses, as these tend to have a stronger and more comprehensive focus on the relevant subject. BTEC courses are often worth as many UCAS 'points' as two A-Levels, meaning that BTEC students are likely to spend two-thirds of their time on one subject. At the other end of the spectrum, students taking the IB (International Baccalaureate) often have trouble in choosing a specialisation, as the IB requires them to take many subjects, from the sciences, humanities and arts, right up until they're 18.

Whatever qualifications you're taking, if you feel very strongly drawn to a single subject many people still struggling to make their minds up will consider you lucky. So if you're really drawn to one of your subjects, **congratulations!** You already have an easy answer to the conundrum of choosing a degree course.

But before you make a final decision, do a quick checklist:

- **Is it the subject, or the class?** Enjoying one class more than others could be to do with the subject: or it could be because you have a talented teacher, a lively discussion group, or a best friend to chat with about the subject. If you're just as excited to buy a textbook on the subject from **Getting-In's** buy-and-sell app as you are to walk into the classroom, you can feel confident in applying to study it at university. But if you find that you enjoy classes, but don't think about the subject much when you're not in them - if you adore your Art teacher, but never go to galleries, or love fighting your corner in Politics classes but always skip straight to the Sports section in newspapers - you might want to rethink your options. After all, neither your teacher nor your classmates will be there at university.
- **Do I like everything about this subject?** Nobody loves *everything* about their subject - but you should be pretty keen to find out about most areas. University degrees are much broader in their range than A-Level subjects are, and some of them involve elements that are completely missing from the teaching at school or sixth-form college. If you want to do an English Literature degree, for example, but are bored by anything published before the 20th century, you should bear in mind that your ability to specialise might be very limited. This is one of the considerations where BTEC students are at an advantage: they generally have a good general grounding in their subjects.

Case Study: Aaliyah, 19, says, 'I was fascinated by Biology when I did it at A-Level, got an A, and was thrilled to get an offer to study Natural Sciences at Queen's College, Cambridge. But within a couple of terms I'd discovered that I really can't stand the experimentation on live animals and dissection of dead ones that we have to do in 'lab' classes. I'm a vegetarian and hate the thought of the animals suffering! Now I'm in talks with my tutor about switching to Veterinary Science, because I know that although I'll have to practice surgeries, I'll be trying to help animals and not just using them for experiments. I thought that I wanted to do 'pure' science, but it turns out that it's just not right for me.'*

If there are only a few elements of the course that bore you, you can do some research into different courses to find out if there's a course that will accommodate you. For example, although many Classics courses require students to learn Ancient Greek and Latin as foreign languages, Classical Civilisations courses offer an alternative for those who want to

concentrate on Classical history and on literature in translation. Just make sure that you **read the university course descriptions** for your chosen subject before going ahead and planning your personal statement.

- **Will this choice affect my career prospects?** For many people, their favourite A-Levels and the career fields they're interested in intersect. But sometimes, sixth-form students have to make the tough decision to choose between a subject they love, and one that will help them to get to where they want to be in life. Many people over-estimate the effect that their degree subjects will have on their careers: it's **usually not important**. For instance, you don't have to study law just because you might want to be a lawyer one day.

However, if you then decide instead to take up your favourite A-Level as a degree course, and the A-Level isn't 'academic' enough - Theatre Studies, Child Development or Art - you might find after graduation that the very traditional career field of law will hold this subject against you. If you're not sure whether continuing with your favourite A-Level could affect your career prospects in the future, ask a member of staff at your school or college. Ideally this *shouldn't* be the teacher of that subject, as s/he could be biased!

Why not check out what employers are looking for in advance? If you look at the current jobs and internships listings on www.Getting-in.com, you'll be able to see what the typical requirements are for the types of jobs you're interested in.

If after going through this check list, you still feel that your favourite A-Level subject is the one with which you want to continue then go for it! Being certain about what you want and about your interests at this stage is a great recipe for success when you get to university.

It's not uncommon for people to enjoy their sixth-form study so much that they don't want to give up *any* of their A-Level subjects! If you're feeling caught between two or three different enjoyable subjects, you might find that your friends feel unsympathetic towards a rather desirable problem - especially those who don't particularly want to continue with any of their own subjects - but it can be a very tricky position to be in.

The best thing to do, if you enjoy two subjects equally, is to make a list comparing their assets *besides* your enjoyment of them. Which subject might be better for your future career? Which are you likely to get better grades in? Which of them is offered by your 'top-choice' universities or colleges? Which is an academic interest, and which is something you could do in your spare time?

This list is useful for two reasons. It allows you to **think logically** through a decision about which you feel strongly; list-making is a recognised psychological tool for clearing a confused head. The

list's other use is less obvious, but often very beneficial: if you've made your list of pros and cons of the different subjects, and worked out which one is the 'winner,' but feel unhappy with that choice anyway, then listen to your gut and go for the alternative. **If the prospect of studying a subject for three years doesn't make you smile, it's not worth doing.**

Case Study: James, 20, says, 'I felt like I was at a crossroads in my life when I had to decide which A-Level subject to continue with to university. I studied French, German and Music - I have Grade 8 Piano and Grade 6 Violin, and had invested a lot of time in my music - but I didn't know whether to take it as a degree subject. Eventually, I realised that as I wasn't good enough to get into a music school or conservatoire with my music, doing a degree in it would be a poor second: all the Music degrees I saw offered by universities were very theoretical, but what I like is playing. I also had difficulty in deciding which language to study. But I found a great joint degree in French and German at the University of Southampton, and at the Open Day I found out that the university has a very good orchestra which tours all over the world. Now I'm enjoying studying my languages, I can't wait to live in Paris during my 'year abroad' next year, and I've made lots of friends and had a lot of fun playing in the first violins in the university orchestra.'

Like James, you may feel that the solution for you is a joint degree: James' French and German interests are fairly easy to combine, but many more subjects can be found in combination if you do your research.

Joint Honours degrees are becoming more and more popular, as students take up the option to explore more than one new subject at university. The University of Leeds has a particularly good spread of joint honours degree subjects. Joint honours degrees are usually the same length as other degree courses (three years), though some may add an extra year, and they give the same award at the end: a BA for arts, humanities or social science subjects, and a BSc for science, mathematical or technical subjects. Some joint degrees place equal weight and award equal credit to both subjects studied, while some take the form of a 'major' subject along with a 'minor,' where classes and assessments in one of the subjects make up the majority of the student's credits and classes in the second subject become an 'extra' element to the degree.

Some people choose to take joint degrees in order to 'get the best of both worlds' by combining a vocational with an academic subject; for instance, English and Journalism, or Law and Arabic. But some just can't make their minds up between two subjects, and decide to go for both!

If you do decide to do a joint honours degree, make sure that your personal statement gives equal weight to both subjects. If you're applying to (for example) a straight single-honours English degree at three of your choices, and an English and Journalism degree at two, you will have to spend a lot of time making sure that your personal statement reflects your passion for both subjects. A good

deal of creative thinking will probably be required to make sure that the English admissions tutors are sure that you're totally committed to English, while the English and Journalism tutors can see that you care about both subjects. This can be very difficult, so the decision to opt for one or more joint honours options on your UCAS Track form is not one to be taken lightly. And if you do decide to go for it, get drafting your statement as soon as possible once you've made this decision!

One way to get around the problem is to emphasise how the subjects are integral to each other: for instance, in the above example you could write largely about English, but focussing on the importance of spreading information and providing social analysis (as good journalism is supposed to do), and also mention your aspiration to be a journalist. It isn't unusual for English students to want to become journalists, so this won't be a red flag to the English admissions tutors as long as you don't talk about it too much; and the tutors at Journalism courses will be aware that many people take their subject in conjunction with another subject during joint honours degrees. For joint honours involving subjects which are both usually taken as single-honours courses, and which don't have a very obvious overlap (such as French and German in James' Case Study above) you will have to work even harder to make your statement relevant to all the tutors.

The alternative to all this personal statement hassle is to choose five joint honours degrees, but if you're picky about which unis you go to you may find this difficult, depending on the course you want. For instance, French and German can be studied at 45 different UK universities; English and Journalism at 25; and 8 for Journalism and French!

But if you don't feel a particular pull towards *any* of your subjects, or you're attracted to all of them equally, your experience with A-Levels can still help you to make a decision. While you look at past papers and other exam preparation tools on **Getting-In's** exam section, you can work out what you like about *each* of your A-Level subjects. This is a great way to work out what's important to you in your learning.

In your current subjects, do you enjoy:

- **Essay writing?** Consider 'humanities' subjects, such as History, Sociology, or English Literature. If the idea of writing a 10,000 word or 15,000 word long essay sounds exciting, you'll be perfect for these subjects. If, on the other hand, you *don't* like essay writing, you should avoid these subjects strenuously as many of them require you to write a high volume of essays. The English course at the University of Oxford can leave students writing up to three or four 2,000 word essays per week!
- **Doing experiments?** Consider one of the more practical science subjects, such as Biology or Bio-engineering. Or if you want to study the humanities, consider a 'cross-over' subject

such as Psychology or Social Science, which often involve experiments and gathering and analysing statistics.

- **Creating your own finished pieces of work?** If being creative is what appeals to you the most, you could do a degree in Art, Music or another subject where you're assessed on the grounds of a finished product. Alternatively, Literature degrees allow a lot of creative freedom; and if you're looking to secure a well-paid graduate job after uni Architecture is an art form which is also intellectually rigorous and can earn its graduates a great salary!
- **Relating your subject to the world around you?** You might interpret this interest as a desire to do an analytical subject such as Sociology or Politics, where a degree involves staying up to date on all the latest developments in society. However, if your favourite part of A-Level study is the part where you get to turn away from the textbook and look at the real world, you may get bored during three years of very academic study. It might be worth considering a degree with a vocational element, or one which involves work or shadowing while studying.
- **Winning arguments in class?** This skill often overlaps with the skills needed for essay writing, so the social sciences and humanities may also be the right choices for you. However, if the part of the arguments you enjoy is finding weak points, you may have the precision and clear thinking needed for a Science- or Engineering-based course. And if your interest is in spoken argument, not in writing down your points, you might want to think of a job involving face-to-face communication that you'd enjoy - such as media sales, recruitment or property dealing - and work backwards from there to think of a degree that will be useful for that career field while avoiding too much written work. Many courses are assessed on verbal presentations: check the specifications on university prospectuses to work out which subjects tend to be assessed in this way.
- **Learning useful new skills?** If your interest is almost always in the practical side of your subjects - learning how to analyse and present data, how to control school children, or how to build a HTML web page - you may want to consider a degree with vocational elements (for instance in Accountancy, Education or Computer Science). However, if you don't really have a definite 'vocation,' it can be tough to decide on one of these. Instead, consider a more general subject which is based in the world around you. Politics, Sociology or Statistics will all reward you for learning research methods, spotting patterns, and coming up with an opinion on the 'best way' to do things.

At the end of the day, the best subject is the subject you love.

But if, after working hard, revising, and checking out plenty of past papers on **Getting-In's** dedicated exam section, none of your A-Level subjects stand out for you, it's worth considering other factors in your decision. It's hard to work out what you'll like before you start studying it, but just doing research and thinking about your priorities can help you to make a decision.

Into The Future: Degrees for Your Career

It's perfectly all right - and perfectly normal - not to have a career plan already in mind when you're applying to university. Some A-Level students can panic when they feel that they 'should have' decided on a future career, and be planning their degrees around it, and if this is you, you should know that it's really not necessary to worry. Many of the world's most successful people didn't know what they wanted to do when they graduated either.

However, many prospective students *do* think about their future careers when trying to choose a degree subject, and in the current economic climate, it does make sense to be planning ahead. (It's also wise to pick a course that you know you can afford - although the great deals available for students at various sites including www.Getting-in.com can help you get along with less money). Sometimes, these decisions are obvious: it doesn't take much guidance for a student to work out that to be a doctor, it's best to do Medicine, or that Accountancy is a degree best studied by people who want to be accountants.

But a lot of the time, prospective students are misled by badly-informed advisors, by their own preconceptions or by aggressive marketing of certain degrees, and end up making the wrong choices.

Generally, there are two ways in which degree subjects and career choices interact:

1. Trying to decide whether to do a degree designed especially to **train you up** for a particular career (Nursing for an aspiring nurse, Hospitality for someone interested in the catering industry, Engineering for an engineer, *etc*).
2. Trying to decide which degree would be **most suitable** for a particular career. (English for a budding journalist, Economics for those hoping to join Lloyds or Barclays, Sociology for social workers?)

These concerns have become more common since the conversion of polytechnics into universities in 1992, and since higher education colleges started to award degrees, because these changes mean that many more vocational degrees have become available.

These are of varying practical value; some, such as Medicine for a career as a doctor, are so useful for certain careers that they're almost obligatory. Some are valuable for the work experience they offer, for the edge that they can give in a competitive industry, or both. Publishing degrees are a good example of this kind of degree; they often prove valuable simply because they provide the

chance to meet publishing professionals who might be looking for entry-level employees in a couple of years.

However, the availability of vocational degree courses, combined with an ever-growing expectation that university is the 'normal' step to take after A-Levels, leaves many people taking up courses which aren't necessarily the right step forwards for them. If you fall into the first group discussed above - people who are trying to decide whether to do a degree which will train them for a specific future career - then although study of this subject at degree level *may* be the right option for you, the decision isn't as easy as many people think it is.

For the majority of careers, there is no 'one degree' which must be taken in order to start work. The medical field - work as a doctor, nurse, technician *etc* - can be an exception to this rule, as this field combines the need for unified standards for new recruits with the need for a rigorously trained skill set. However, many degree-career progressions which young people often feel are natural are, in fact, not as simple as they appear.

This is because degrees are **academic courses**. They don't aim to train young people with concrete skills to use in the job market, as some other training courses do.

So for example, a budding accountant might think that he or she should do an Accountancy degree; but these degrees, although they include *some* skill training, will also require the student to learn about the history of accounting, the reasoning behind the methodologies used *etc*, and will require coursework and exams which may be based more around essay questions than demonstrable skills. Meanwhile, a recognised and respected non-degree qualification in Accountancy can also be obtained from CIMA (the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants), so if your only focus is your career and you don't particularly like academia, this might be your best option.

Especially in the current climate, taking non-degree qualifications may be the best option for young people who want to join a specific career. Higher education colleges are set to become more popular, as the cost for a vocational course is now far lower than that of a £27,000 degree.

If you're considering doing a profession-specific degree, the other factor to consider is that you need to be really, really sure that this is what you want. If you're going to take a very specific subject at degree level, such as Education, Hotel Management, Physiotherapy or any other vocational degree, have a look at this checklist:

- **Have you known that this is what you want to do for at least a year?** People change their minds a lot, and sixth-form is a particularly up-and-down period of many people's lives. If you think that you're sure about a certain career, but you've only had it in mind for a

couple of months, consider taking a gap year to really make your mind up rather than sending your UCAS Track form off straight away and taking the risk of ending up on a course that you change your mind about.

- **Do you know the career structure you want to follow within the profession, and have some idea of how that might work?** For instance, you might want to 'be a journalist,' but journalism includes many different types of job. Do you want to write news stories, reviews, or opinion pieces? For newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, or online? If you don't know how the career structure works and where you want to be in it, you shouldn't be committing three years of your life to pursuing that profession.
- **Have you spoken to someone who works in that career?** This can help you make your mind up about the career, and this person can tell you how useful a vocation-specific degree is. If you (and your parents) don't know anyone who works in that career personally, have a look for professionals in your area. You'd be surprised to find out how many people are willing to take a little time to talk to a local teen who wants to follow in their footsteps. If you want to work in tourism, sending a short, VERY polite e-mail to a local hotel manager, theatre owner or travel agent asking for a little information on their career will often get you a friendly response. Or if you have a good careers advisor or university applications tutor, ask them if they could find somebody to speak to you: it's their job!

Remember that some more vocational courses - both degree and non-degree courses - will require **work experience** in your chosen field, to make sure that you can demonstrate your commitment to the profession. Check the admissions requirements of the course or courses you're interested in; if the requirements say something vague such as 'work experience will be preferred,' don't be afraid to contact the admissions tutor or administrator to see whether that means that candidates without experience are unlikely to be admitted.

Finally, a last point to bear in mind is that many careers **don't require you** to have a degree that exactly matches the profession. For instance, in the above example, a budding accountant who decided that a degree was important to them wouldn't have to feel restricted to studying Accountancy. Qualifications in Maths, Business Studies, Economics or Finance would also be great, as you can see if you check out the job listings available in the section where **Getting-In** lists jobs and internships. This is true for many professions, including the most prestigious. Below are a few examples of common misconceptions about certain professions and the degrees that are required for them:

- **Law.** Many people think that all lawyers have Law degrees, but this isn't true at all. *Some* lawyers do, of course, but if you do work experience in a lawyers' office and ask some of your colleagues which subjects they studied at university, it's unlikely that the majority of them will say Law. Law offices often represent a wide range of graduates in different

subjects; mainly within the humanities and social sciences, but with no restriction on science or arts graduates. This is because becoming a lawyer actually involves a year-long special training course, as well as several placements within companies: those who have studied Law at university may be at a slight advantage, but as in the Publishing example above, it's really the grades and the university that count.

- **Banking.** Again, access to this career is more about your academic record - and, perhaps even more crucially, about your performance in selection tests and activities - than about the subject you studied. Big financial institutions invest a lot of money in training new employees, and in a rigorous selection process: they won't simply accept anyone with an Economics or Business Studies degree, and they won't turn down a highly intelligent and motivated candidate because his or her degree is in Physics, Sociology or Classics.
- **Teaching.** There are Education degrees available, yes, and these can be great. Many of them offer work experience placements in schools, which will look great on your CV as well as giving you the confidence you need when you do first turn up in a classroom. However, many, many teachers do not have education degrees. This is because, whether you have a degree in Education, Business Studies or Astrophysics, you need to do a PGCE after graduating to be accepted as a teacher by any British state school. (Private schools are a different story.) The work experience offered as part of Education degrees can be useful, but it isn't something to stress about too much. Although teaching is a desirable profession, it is often less insanely competitive than other good careers, as the job is almost recession-proof: children will always need educating.

Case Study: Joe, 24, says, 'I was really surprised when a leading investment company sent promotional leaflets to people on my course, as I was studying Philosophy, not Economics or Maths! But it got me thinking, and when I graduated I applied for the graduate course there. The interview process was gruelling, but I got a place in the end - and I'm still there now. I've found out that people with my background in Philosophy often do really well on the problem-solving and lateral thinking parts of the interview process for banks, which is why the bank thought I might be a good "investment!"'

Changing Your Mind?

A crucial thing to bear in mind when choosing your degree is that **people change their minds about their careers**. The 'Happy Families' career paths - 'Mr Bun the Baker,' 'Mr Chalk the Teacher' - which have been traditional rarely occur any more. In the late 1990s, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair made very influential remarks about the end of choosing a 'job for life' in one's teens: statisticians now estimate that the average UK worker will change his or her career (not their specific job title, but their entire field of work) between five and seven times in his or her lifetime.

Case Study: Angie, 49, says, 'I did a degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Sussex, and loved it. While at university, I decided that I wanted to become a journalist. However, I graduated into the 1980s recession, and no papers were taking on new staff. I took what was supposed to be a 'stopgap' job as a receptionist for the local County Council Housing Office, and became fascinated by the atmosphere. As a graduate, I was eligible to apply to become a housing officer, which I did! But after having a chance to explore my communications skills while on the job, I sidestepped into writing for the marketing and communications arm of the council, which satisfied my wordsmith side. I continued with marketing and communications, but felt the public sector wasn't for me and started working for a chain of supermarkets. When the internet came along, the role of marketing shifted, and nowadays my official title is 'Digital Marketing and Social Media Manager' - I spend most of the day on Facebook and Twitter! I would never have dreamt that this would be what I ended up doing, but I love my job. And who knows what's next?'

This means that, if you choose a very specific course (like Pharmacology, Librarianship, or Dentistry), changing your mind about your future will result in the course becoming something that bores you and seems irrelevant. Not only that, but when you do graduate, you might find that a degree which is clearly designed specifically for a career you don't want to pursue any more will hinder your chance in the jobs market. For example, if you decide while at university that you really want to work in art galleries, a Librarianship degree will make it hard to convince an employer that working in the art world has always been your dream career! Not that you'll have no chance of getting a job in an alternative field; it just might be more difficult than if you'd stayed neutral with a degree in English, History or Psychology.

Of course, you might never change your mind about your chosen profession, and graduate with the perfect degree to launch you into the great career you'd planned on! But - as I've discussed above - university is a time when a lot of people discover new things about themselves, re-evaluate their priorities and preferences, and develop new interests.

This doesn't mean that a career-specific degree is always a bad thing; far from it! Some of the most contented graduates are those who've used their degree to boost their chances in their chosen career fields.

But quite often, these people have chosen their degrees when they're **slightly older** than the typical A-Level student is. Some people who are already working in a certain career decide to get a formal qualification to improve their future prospects: some do a vocational degree as the first step in a career change; and some spend a year or two directly after their A-Levels gaining work experience in the field they're interested in before committing to the **three years and £27,000 bill** which a university or higher education college degree involves.

It's the subject that you like the most in which you'll usually get the best grades: and grades, and good universities, count for most employers far more than subjects do. Although an English degree, for instance, may be useful for a budding young publisher, a First in History from a first-tier university will be a better asset for an application to Macmillan or Penguin than a 2.1 in English from a second-tier one. This is why, in this guide, I've stressed the importance of choosing your **subject first**.

After all, there are many different paths into most careers. Even budding doctors can 'convert' their non-Medical degrees into the right qualifications with one post-graduate 'top-up' year. But being at university as an undergraduate is an experience that you'll probably only have once. Many people don't realise it, but the Student Loans Company will only lend you money for **one undergraduate degree**. So unless you plan on being rich enough to shoulder the fees privately in the future, being an undergraduate is a one-time experience, and one that you want to make sure you enjoy.

What Do You Love?

It's always nice when people take the advice to '**do what you love**' to heart. By the time you're writing your UCAS application in the 'A2' Christmas term, your passion may not revolve around one of your A-Level subjects, or even around your aspirations for future career plans, but around something else entirely. You may well end up making a career out of a hobby like playing the cello, mountaineering or web design, but to take Music, Geography or Computer Science as a subject at degree level doesn't mean that you *have* to do these things as a profession. Many people use university as a chance to **fully explore** something that interests them, while getting the useful asset of a degree at the end. A good degree in almost any subject will give all graduates an edge over non-graduates, and will open up career paths that otherwise wouldn't be available.

Case Study: Jamal, 24, says, 'I'd always loved comics and graphic novels, and during secondary school I started to draw my own strips. I got quite good, set up a website for myself which got a fair amount of hits, and really loved to draw! My A-Levels were in Business Studies, English and French, but I wasn't really excited by the idea of doing any of them at degree level. I didn't know that Illustration was a degree subject, but when I found a great course at the University of Brighton I went for it! The course was brilliant and I made lots more illustration-keen friends - unlike at sixth-form, nobody thought comics were weird or geeky! I'm still working on my blog and enjoy my drawing, but very few graphic novelists make it into their career; that doesn't matter though, because I have a great job managing staff for the NHS. My job is really fulfilling but quite challenging, and I wouldn't have been eligible for it without having a degree.'

When you're deciding on a degree subject, it's worth thinking about *all* the ways that you spend your time, and working out which ones you truly enjoy. (Aside from having a laugh in town with your friends - don't worry, you'll keep doing this whatever degree or career you choose!)

You might decide that it's the volunteering you do at a youth club or old people's home, your part-time job at Topshop, finding great jokes and pics for your Tumblr, playing five-a-side on Saturdays, or just reading in your bedroom... could these lead to degrees in Social Care, Fashion Merchandising, Creative Writing, Sport Science or English Literature?

Or if you have very strong opinions about a certain issue or aspect of life, you may decide to select a degree which allows you to explore things from that angle: Gender Studies, Consumer Behaviour, Social Policy or Islamic Studies. **Once you work out what you really like in your life *now*, it's easier to work out what you'll want to do in the future.**

Remember, your teachers and parents may have their own agendas when giving you advice. Take it politely and with thanks, but remember that at the end of the day it's you who's going to be studying this subject for three (or four!) years. If you don't really want to do it, you're unlikely to do very well at it. And dropping out, or getting bad grades, will be a big waste of your (and your parents'!) money.

These adults often do have great advice to offer, and parents and teachers should be the first people to go to if you're stuck for answers when making your decision. But they can have ideas about university study which are out of date. You can see how common this is by taking a look at the explanation of the slur term 'Mickey Mouse courses' at the end of '**Chapter One: All About University.**' Instead, you should consider advice from peers, schools, and the great online resources, such as **Getting-In's** comprehensive university, course and subject guides, which can help you out when you're stuck.

Most prospective university applicants have a look at other sources of advice, besides guidance from parents or from teachers, before choosing. Sometimes, the eye of a parent or a teacher is too close: they lack the ability to step back and give you objective advice. So it's worth asking around. If you, or a friend, has an older sibling who's attended university, his or her opinion could be useful. It's highly subjective of course, and you shouldn't make a decision based *solely* on one person's opinion, but asking a current university student or recent graduate can be more helpful than asking advice from people who went through the university system years - or decades - ago. And even if the sibling didn't do the subject in which you're interested, chances are that he or she has friends who did.

Some schools and sixth-form colleges put on events where current students or recent graduates come to talk to AS or A-Level students about their experiences: don't miss these if you're trying to make a decision about university. Your teacher may also have a former student available as a 'contact,' who doesn't mind giving e-mail advice to somebody thinking about taking the subject that he or she studied. **Don't be afraid to ask!**

One of the most obvious - and often the most helpful - ways to make up your mind is to take a look at **university websites** to read about the courses available and what it's like to study them. University or college prospectuses tend to focus on the institution as a whole, with only a page or half-page given to each subject, but many universities also have special 'subject' prospectuses, full of information, testimonials and advice. E-mailing a university with a request for a subject prospectus is a good idea.

In addition, many universities, including the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, Aberystwyth, Newcastle and Harper Adams, have special '**unofficial prospectuses**' available (usually online) as well as the official documents. These prospectuses often include honest, warts-and-all information about various subjects or degrees, written by current students. Of course, none of them will be entirely negative, because no university wants to put people off applying to study there, so you'll need to read between the lines a little, but they can be more informative than the official prospectuses in helping you decide whether a certain subject is a 'club you'd like to join.'

For instance, lines from the CUSU (Cambridge University Students' Union) 'Unofficial Prospectus,' available at www.applytocambridge.com, include:

- 'Economics at Cambridge has a mathematical rigour that will allow those who have a penchant for understanding concepts through maths to take this further. For those who are less inclined to work through pages of formulas, the course gives you freedom to limit how much of this you undertake (though there is no getting away from it completely).'
- 'The [Music] course is incredibly diverse, and will give you the opportunity to study a range of different aspects of music: history, theory, composition, analytical skills, performance, ethnomusicology, and many more.'
- 'Geography truly can cater for nearly everybody's interests, and the course covers a wide range of highly relevant and interesting topics in both human and physical geography (including globalisation, colonialism and post-colonialism, environmental change and volcanology).'

These and other course/subject descriptions available on alternative prospectuses can sum up what the *students* feel is important about the subject in a **snappier and more direct** way than more official information.

There are many other great resources available to help out students who are having difficulty making a decision about their subjects; nowadays these are mainly found **online**.

Most of these resources revolve around advice from past and current students, university professionals, *etc.* The idea is that the better informed you are about your options, the easier you'll find it to choose a subject.

If you want more targeted and clear *advice*, as opposed to *information*, some sites do offer 'aptitude tests' or 'quizzes' designed to help you make your mind up. However, very few people (quite rightly!) take the advice of an automatically generated internet quiz result as the foundation of their degree choices. Many of these 'decision-making' tests are made by people with no qualifications or advisory expertise, and often work on out-dated information.

UCAS does run an official 'quiz' aimed at helping AS or A-Level students to decide on a degree subject: the Stamford test, which is a more basic version of the Centigrade test, also available from UCAS. You may have been shown one or both of these tests at school, but they are also available from the UCAS website: you just need to register, which, of course, most prospective university students will have done anyway.

The official UCAS tests are not designed to help you jump to a quick answer, probably because UCAS, as a well-respected and professional institution, doesn't want to be seen to give students hasty advice without having engaged with them first. However, the Stamford test is probably overly cautious. Most of the questions are quite circular, and seem to be designed for those who already know what to do: this is strange, as the test is supposed to be aimed at undecided students. For instance, '*Would you very much like to take a course on computing?*' or '*Would you like a course in which physics is used to solve a variety of technical problems?*' If you answer 'yes' to one of these, you've pretty much made your decision anyway!

In addition, the 'results' are very vague: I sampled the test, and was told I could consider a degree in either 'humanities,' social sciences,' or 'the arts' - this doesn't narrow down the choices much.

Other great internet resources, which don't usually involve quizzes but do have a lot of good advice, include:

- **UCAS**, @ www.ucas.com. Obviously, this site is first port of call for students looking to get official advice when they decide on their applications - but relatively few students use it for preliminary research, which is a shame, as there are many useful resources available. Some useful ones are the Entry Profiles giving each course's requirements; an easily

searchable directory of all courses available in the UK; and UCAS' partner sites, some of which are given below.

- **Unistats, @ unistats.direct.gov.uk.** A UCAS partner site, and official government site (as you can see from its address), which gives the results of the National Student Survey in an easily accessible and understandable form. This site rates different courses at different unis to give the percentage of graduates employed with a 'graduate' job (e.g. one which they wouldn't have been able to get without a degree, not just a job behind the till or behind the bar!), and the percentage of students who told the survey they were 'satisfied' with the course. You can search here by subject or university, so it's worth coming back here when you're ready to decide **which university is right for you** as well. Remember, as well, to check out the listings in the **job and internship** section of www.Getting-in.com, so that you can see which degrees are being requested by different types of employers.
- **Student Stories, @ www.studentstories.co.uk.** A UCAS partner site, this site has text, audio, photos and video of students talking honestly about their own university experiences. You can search by keyword about almost any aspect of university life, from culture shock to homesickness and, of course, the stories of other people's **experience of different subjects**.
- **iCould, @ icould.com.** A UCAS partner site, this site has hundreds of videos featuring graduates working in almost every sector, talking about their career choices. Very useful for those trying to make their minds up about subjects based on career prospects!
- **Education sections of newspapers.** The broadsheet newspapers - *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Telegraph* - all have lots of news stories about every aspect of higher education. Usually the education supplements will be sold with the paper once a week (usually on Saturdays), but *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Telegraph* all have their archives available online. So if you need to know more about a subject you're considering, you can type the name of the subject into the internal search engine at www.guardian.co.uk, www.independent.co.uk, or www.telegraph.co.uk and see if there are any recent articles about it. This is best for those who are considering their subjects in great depth, specially students considering an academic career, as many articles will be about amount of research funding available at different unis, which professors teach where, etc. It's not a good idea to start thinking about subject choices or to look for inspiration if you're stuck on these sites, as the information is often quite complex and specific. But a flick through the 'Education' sections is worth it once you've made a preliminary decision, whichever subject you're thinking of.
- **Complete University Guide, @ www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk.** This site is mainly known for the **comprehensive subject league tables** that it publishes, a selection of which can be seen in **Inset Four**. However, they also offer advice on picking a course and a subject, including a featured 'Course of the Week' provided by UCAS Course Discover.

And for all you ultra-competitive or masochistic people out there, the CUG even lets you know which courses in the UK are the hardest!

However you choose your subject, it's important to make your selection carefully. This checklist summarises the **ten steps towards a decision** that have been described in this chapter:

1. **Think about your A-Levels**
2. **Think about your career plans (if you have any)**
3. **Think about what you enjoy out of school/ sixth-form college**
4. **Ask your parents for advice**
5. **Ask your teachers for advice**
6. **Ask current or recent university students for advice**
7. **Ask advice from people working in the career you're aiming for (if this is relevant)**
8. **Attend your tutors' guidance days**
9. **Read official and unofficial university subject prospectuses**
10. **Get advice from reputable online sources**

If, after having done all of this, you still don't know which subject you want to do at the beginning of your A-Level year, be wary of simply 'plumping for' a subject because you can't think of anything else. It's better to take a gap year while you work out what you really want to do than it is to commit to a course you're not sure about. You may be keen to get off to university, in order to get out of your parents' house, and to avoid feeling 'left behind' by friends, but choosing the wrong subject could lead to you getting bad marks, or even dropping out. Either of these will set you back years, and waste quite a lot of money!

It's natural to change your mind, and in a way, these students are victims of the system which forces A-Level students to choose their degree subjects so early. Plans are underway to alter this timetable, so that students would only apply for courses at the end of the summer after A-Levels, when they already have their final results. There's a full explanation of these possible changes in '**Chapter Four: Navigating The Application Process.**' But for the time being, if you haven't made your mind up in time for the UCAS deadline in January, it's best to simply wait and see.

This is because very few universities will allow students to change course subjects once they've been admitted onto a specific course. Each course is regulated by its own independent staff, and has its own quotas for the number of people it can reasonably teach, so it isn't as simple as the university switching your subject. And of course, if you decide that you want to study a subject which isn't available at the university which has accepted you after all, you won't be able to apply to another university until next January. So take a good hard look at all of the course, subject and

university choices available on www.Getting-in.com, so that you can be sure you're picking your perfect choice.

Some universities *will* allow students to change subject courses once they've been accepted. The University of Cambridge's 'Tripos' system, where degrees come in two 'parts' of a year or two each, is especially designed to accommodate this need. But at Cambridge and elsewhere, a university's willingness to let students change courses is based on:

- **The discretion of the tutors.** No university has an obligation to accommodate a student who wants to switch subjects. It's completely up to each university, and responsibility for the decision will often lie with just one tutor. Don't *ever* enter a desirable university on a course you don't want to do on the presumption that you'll be able to switch once you've been admitted. There's no sure way of predicting the university's decision.
- **The timing of your decision.** *Some* universities may allow a subject-switch to students who've already been studying at the university for some time. But this will often only be allowed at certain points. For instance, in the Cambridge Tripos system, a switch must be done at the start of second year or third year. You'll never be able to do it halfway through an academic year, no matter how sick you are of your course.
- **The force behind your decision.** In order to change courses, you'll have to prove that you're now just as passionate about the new subject as you were about your old one - and that you've brought yourself up-to-date on it in your own time.

For all these reasons, changing subjects is very difficult and complicated - even if the request is granted, you're very likely to be asked to repeat a year or take a couple of terms out in order to start with the new intake of students. As university fees are non-refundable, this means that changing courses will usually **cost you at least £9,000 in fees**, as well as setting you back a year.

Case Study: Isabella, 21, says, 'I thought that by this time I'd have a degree in my pocket, but actually I've got a long way to go. I started studying Computer Engineering at Newcastle University but during first year I didn't enjoy any part of the degree: I hadn't really understood how technical computer engineering would be and wanted to focus more on practical things like designing software for the internet. During the last term I got the guts to ask to change, but my tutors weren't very receptive and I felt I was letting them down. Although I'd liked Newcastle at first I started to associate it with failure after the problem with my subject, and although I eventually got onto the Computer Science software course I dropped out in second year. Now I don't know what I want to do - I got off to a really bad start with a subject that I didn't like.'

And it's *extremely unlikely* that any university will consider a subject switch from a student who hasn't started the course they've been selected for yet. Until university staff have had the chance

to see that you're a hard-working student and have got to know you they're very unlikely to accommodate requests to change. All that this request will do is to make the universities think that you lied in the personal statement where you enthused about how much you loved your original subject!

So don't think of it as a bad thing to wait a year after the time when your teachers are encouraging you to apply to university, so that you can apply in the winter after taking your A-Levels, instead. This way, you'll be far surer **of what you want to do.**

Chapter Three: Choosing The University That's Right For You

Now that you know which subject you want to do, you can start selecting a university!

Of course, it's not quite that cut and dried. Although choosing a subject should be the most important consideration, it's very hard to avoid thinking about your choice of university entirely. Many parents and teachers care far more about the particular university you go to than they care about the subject you might study there. You might also have strong opinions about the kind of place you want to live in - after all, for a lot of sixth-form students, university represents not just the start of a degree, but **the beginning of a life away from 'home.'** Whether you spend your university years in a big city, a cosy campus, a student town or a rural idyll is often very important to prospective students. And for others, staying close to family, friends, boyfriend or girlfriend is one of the most important things.

Case Study: Adrian, 20, says, 'I got offers for Politics for all six of my choices, including Oxford (PPE), SOAS and Imperial College London - my personal 'big three.' My teachers were surprised - and my parents quite upset - when I turned down Oxford. But I'd always dreamed of living in the capital, and experiencing the kind of nightlife and culture I felt I'd missed out on growing up in rural Dorset. Now, I get good grades at Imperial, intern one day a week at a Westminster office, go out clubbing every weekend, and I couldn't be happier!'

In addition, while you're researching your subject you'll often run into comparisons between different universities. There's no denying that courses vary widely between different universities, so when you're trying to find out what a subject such as 'South Eastern Studies' or 'Biochemical Engineering' *really* involves, you'll have to take a look at more than one university course description; and it's inevitable that you'll end up comparing the different institutions. Plus, if you're using university websites or prospectuses to find out more about subjects, you'll inadvertently find out about different universities.

So, most people actually end up thinking about 'which subject?' and 'which university?' in tandem. And with **over forty-three thousand** different higher education courses available through UCAS, you're facing a big task when it comes to choosing five to put down on your Track form.

Don't get too attached to a particular university before you know for certain that you're eligible for entry. This doesn't just mean that you should apply for a course whose entry requirements are similar to your actual AS or predicted A-Level grades. Many courses will not accept certain A-Levels, or **only** accept students with at least one 'preferred' A-Level. For this reason, you should always check out the course and university requirements before you get excited about that institution. In very rare cases, a student will decide that s/he wants to go to a certain university so

much that it's worth their re-taking AS-Levels to get into the course, but for most people, it's far easier to just pick a different institution.

The most common subject requirement is that UCAS applicants are currently studying, or otherwise involved in, the subject they're applying to study during their degree. The likelihood of this requirement being stated depends on the course that you're applying for. For example, a competitive but commonly available subject like English, History or Maths is likely to demand an A-Level in that subject. Otherwise, it's hard to believe that the candidate is passionate about the subject, when s/he didn't take the chance to progress beyond GCSE with it. Even if you're applying to a university which doesn't state that you need any A-Levels in particular for a course, if the subject is one of these widely available ones, you should **make clear in your personal statement** why you now want to study this subject, when you didn't choose to a year ago. This can also go in your teacher's reference, if the reason was to do with the school.

Meanwhile, subjects which are often unavailable in schools or sixth-form colleges, such as Classics, Leisure and Tourism, Accountancy or Anthropology will require the student to already have an A-Level in the subject only very rarely.

The next most common requirement is for sciences. Almost all science-based courses require at least one science A-Level. Some, such as the Natural Sciences course at Cambridge or any Medicine course, will ask for three.

The most common subjects to be disallowed by universities are General Studies and Critical Thinking, which are often seen as 'Mickey Mouse' or 'soft' subjects. Because of this, many schools now no longer encourage students who want to go to university to do these subjects. Many universities do still accept these though, so if you're taking them don't assume you won't be able to get a place. Just check the course prospectus 'entry requirements' section even more thoroughly!

Many universities have a list of the subjects which they don't 'count' as A-Levels. Most of them will say that they don't penalise students for having a certain subject in their stack of A-Levels. But what they mean by this is that it's OK to do that subject, as long as you're also taking at least three other 'acceptable' subjects up to A-Level. And you must have good grades in these subjects, so focus on your A-Levels and use **Getting-In's** online past papers and exam guidance to make sure you get the best possible GCSE and A-Level grades.

After years of rumours, these requirements were made more transparent in February 2011 with a pamphlet published by the Russell Group of universities outlining the top universities' A-Level requirements. As a reader of this book, you've probably already chosen and started your AS

subjects at least, so I won't detail everything in the pamphlet, but if you're trying to decide which subjects to take to A-Level and you want to go to one of the most academic or oldest universities (you can see a list of Russell Group universities in **Inset Five**) then looking up this pamphlet is a good idea. And generally speaking, if you're applying to do an academic subject where assessment is based on essays or experimenting rather than presentations, participation or project work, you'd do well to take the more 'school-like' subjects to A-Level.

Most students will only do three A-Levels, so they can't afford to have one of them disqualified. So make sure that your chosen course **will consider** your A-Levels to be valid.

Of course, if you want to do a more vocational or practical degree, you should check the course requirements to see if the university asks for an A-Level in the subject. This is more likely to be the case in subjects such as Drama or Business Studies, which many schools offer at A-Level, than in more obscure or vocational degrees like Optometry, HR or Land Management.

Bearing in mind that you should look at the admissions requirements checklists before selecting any course for your UCAS Track form, you're now ready to start seriously looking at different universities. There are two main ways in which to consider possible universities for your study:

1. **Do you like the university itself?**
2. **Do you like the way it teaches your subject?**

Each is equally important.

But the second consideration is the one that's most **often neglected**. Too often, people assume that 'Geography,' 'Physics' or 'Business Studies' are roughly the same course everywhere. After they've selected a subject, they think that they're free to choose a university based only on its prestige, its nightlife, or its grade requirements. But checking out the specifics of the course is an essential step, that shouldn't be missed out.

Of course, for some people - such as those who want to study Veterinary Science or Burmese - the university choices are pretty limited (seven universities in the UK train vets, and only one teaches Burmese!). But if you know that you want to include, for instance, web design on your Computer Science programme, or American Literature on your English course, your choices may be more limited than you think. **Check up on it!**

Have a look at the variables of different universities' subject courses with **your own priorities** in mind. What's important to one student is irrelevant to another, which is why so many different courses on the same subject can be filled each year.

It isn't simply a question of people being aligned to universities along a hierarchy, with the 'best' students' at the 'best' universities and so on in descending order. Sadly, though, that's an impression that it's easy to pick up when you're working in the competitive atmosphere of sixth-form college, particularly if your school is very academic. Private and 'public' schools are some of the worst culprits for this kind of competitiveness - but it's best to ignore any mates who talk about the 'top' or 'best' universities, as it's only you who know what the best universities are for you. Plus, as the education landscape changes so fast, they're unlikely to know which courses really *are* best unless they're spending days doing nothing but reading the education pages in newspapers!

Similarly, if teachers are pressuring you, you should remember that they may not purely have your best interests at heart. Schools, and even individual teachers, are often judged according to how many students they get into 'Russell Group' or 'Oxbridge' universities, so they may be very encouraging of applications to these universities. Make sure that you don't get confused into thinking that the course your teacher wants for you is necessarily the **best course for you**.

Remember your **own priorities** when picking out a university.

This isn't only important in ensuring that you are as happy as possible with the course once you get to university. Choosing a course that's **right for you** also considerably boosts your chances of **getting in**.

Ensuring that a course is perfect for you will also mean that **you are perfect for the course**. If you've made your choice well, admissions tutors will get the impression that you and the university fit each other like a hand and a glove.

The relative importance of these different factors will depend on a lot of requirements which are **individual to you**. Your own interests, working style and plans for the future will decide which course is best for you; and there are no 'good' or 'bad' interests, work styles or aspirations.

One of the most important things to consider is: **which subject areas are covered in the course?** You may think that you've chosen your subject, but some big subject areas such as 'History,' 'Psychology' or 'Drama' can vary so widely that they're almost different courses. Psychology in particular can be taught as a science (a BSci) which will involve a lot of work with statistics, the neurobiology of the brain, *etc*, or as an arts/ humanities subject (a B.A.), like politics or history, and include theories of the mind by philosopher-psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Melanie Klein. Even with examples less extreme, it's obvious that choosing the right university for a course will have almost as much impact as choosing the right subject. If, for example, you fell in love with literature through reading F. Scott Fitzgerald and Toni Morrison during your A-Levels, you

might not want to take an English course at a university which doesn't allow for the study of American literature. So make sure that your university choices will allow you to get what you really want out of your subject.

Case Study: Carli, 23, says, 'My 'thing' has always been languages. Because my mother is from Martinique, I've always been able to speak French and Martinique Kreol as well as English - and at school Spanish and German quickly became my favourite subjects. After my AS year, when I got As in French, Spanish and German, I decided that I definitely wanted to be a translator. My teacher wanted me to try for Oxford or Cambridge, but when I looked up the courses at those universities I found out that they focused on literature and literary theory - it just didn't seem like they'd be very useful in making me into a fluent translator, and there were hardly any oral classes. I eventually found a course at UCL which was academically challenging but also taught great speaking and reading skills. I also started going to lots of events and debates with live translators, to see how they did it. I don't think so many translated events happen in Oxford or Cambridge, but politicians and writers from all over the world come to London - and in the end my Mum was glad to have me in the same city as her! Now I've just got my first professional translating job, and I couldn't be happier.'

Most prospective university students, by this stage, have an idea of *what* they want to study within their chosen degree subjects.

But do you know *how* you like to study?

At most schools, there isn't much chance to decide what you like: you're *told* the system that you're going to learn within. For almost all A-Levels, this includes assessment for the final grade through both exams and coursework, and the size of your classes will depend on the size of your school or sixth-form college and the popularity of your subject. There aren't many choices to make.

However, at university level, you can use prospectuses and open days to work out the **style of learning** that a particular institution favours, and decide which one works for you.

For some people - especially mature students or young parents - it's important to be able to work at a full-time job to support themselves while studying at university. These applicants' choice of university may be more constrained than others, as they will have to 'filter out' any university that doesn't offer a part-time course. Luckily, many degrees can be taken part-time. More vocational degrees in particular are often designed to allow a student to work while studying, and both Birkbeck (within the University of London) and the Open University which operates distance learning that students can do from home, also have courses designed to fit around a 40 hour work

week. These courses will take longer - sometimes twice as long - to complete as more traditional full time undergraduate courses, but they are by far the best option for some people.

If you are looking for a full-time or part-time job to sustain yourself while studying, remember that **Getting-In's** jobs section has a wide range of opportunities available.

Even if you don't have needs as dramatic as an allowance for a full time work or childcare week, teaching style and quality can still be big factors in your university decision - especially if you don't want to do postgraduate academic work (such as an MA or a PhD). Many prestigious universities get their reputations through having a good research output, with world-renowned experts on staff; but this often leads to the undergraduate teaching being low on the list of priorities for busy academics.

Many smaller universities have great undergraduate teaching: a good example here is the University of Loughborough. Loughborough's faculty are relatively little-known for their research, but the university offers such supportive undergraduate teaching that its student satisfaction results alone regularly put it in the UK's Top Ten universities (see **Inset Four**).

But not all different teaching styles are universally 'good' or 'bad.'

For instance, admissions tutors are often asked **'How much assessment is through coursework, and how much through exams?'**

Some students hate coursework, some hate exams. This one is really an individual preference. Naturally, the method of assessment depends to some degree on the subject; you won't find a degree in Maths or the sciences which doesn't involve any exam work, as so much of these degrees rely on the ability to remember facts and to think on one's feet. Meanwhile, it's not uncommon for practical or creative subjects such as Performing Arts to be 'exam free,' instead grading each student through performances, portfolio pieces, dissertations and/or presentations.

At the same time, some courses test students with exams or dissertation hand-ins at the end of each year, or at the end of the degree, while some use a 'continuous assessment' system more like the American college undergraduate grading method, maintaining a 'grade average' for each student which is affected by each piece of work handed in or exam completed. Again, **it's up to you** which system you prefer - although if you want to do postgraduate research work, you should aim for courses which will require you to write dissertations or project reports, so that you can prove your ability to complete a longer piece of work.

Once you've decided on your subject area, one of the most important factors to distinguish courses in the same subject from one another is the prospects which they offer for **your future**.

This doesn't simply mean going to a university as high up in the league tables as possible (although I have provided some data from league tables in **Inset Four!**)

Teaching quality also includes the precise skills taught. Again, there is a lot of variation within subjects which might be widely described as 'vocational,' and while each type of course is perfectly valid, and most will get you a good degree, you do need to work out what your priorities are.

For instance, a Journalism course may lean to the more academic side, with courses on the history of journalism *etc*, or concentrate on skills such as proof-reading, web blogging, and other vocational topics.

Many people also want to know which **work experience or networking** opportunities will be available, or *might* be available, during a particular course.

Some courses - usually more vocational courses such as Hospitality, Engineering or Journalism - have work experience as an integral part of the degree. Engineering, in particular, often includes a compulsory year at a work experience placement which is required in order to graduate. Medicine or Nursing students generally have experience in a hospital or GP's surgery as an integral part of their degree from the very beginning; as learning to deal with people as a doctor or nurse is almost as important as academic knowledge. If you're choosing a vocational degree because you know that you want to take up a certain career, it's important to realise that **not all vocational degrees are the same** simply because they teach the same skills and information: and the quality of the work experience offered is an important variable factor.

Even if work experience isn't a part of the course, networking opportunities can be valuable. Creative Writing is notorious for what some perceive as its strong 'networking' aspect, in which some students sign up to the course hoping to meet the tutor's literary agent or publisher! Networking shouldn't be the only reason you choose a course, but it can be a helpful extra. If a famous lawyer, journalist or designer that you idolise is on the staff for a particular course, that's definitely a check in the 'pro' column!

Similar to networking, though it's not quite the same thing, is the consideration which budding academics often bear in mind: who will I be able to **ask for a reference?**

Although most entry-level graduate jobs will ask for a reference from a university tutor (because many new graduates don't have former employers to ask for references, or only have employers from minimum wage 'stopgap' jobs at Pizza Hut or Topshop), most companies don't really care who your reference is. (Check out **Getting-In's** jobs and internships section to see if there are exceptions to this rule - for instance, professional musician or artist jobs may well ask for a more specific reference).

However, **it's a different story** for postgraduate courses. Some careers which call for great academic credentials, such as think tanks or international NGOs, will also privilege applicants who have references from heavyweights in their academic fields - but it's those students who want to do MAs, MScs, MPhils or PhDs in the future who should be scoping out the universities with the **most prestigious academics** working as tutors. You can find out about the tutors' academic records on the university websites: each tutor should have a little profile below his or her name, giving important publications and prizes. If you can't find enough information, use your 21st-century *nous* and **Google it!**

As I stressed in the last chapter, if there's something you want to know about the course, **ask!** Universities will love to hear from you, because it shows how thoroughly and responsibly you're thinking about your studies - which makes you likely to be a more conscientious and dedicated student. Some universities even have **dedicated live help lines** manned by staff and current students, to help you out with questions. (If you're applying through Clearing, there should be **double** the amount of help that there usually is, and you can be even more forthright and direct in your questions about the course.)

Case Study: Ashwar, 22, says, 'I've always had a gift for playing around with computers, and was planning to do Computer Science at uni. I was a little sad to leave my Philosophy and Psychology interests behind though, as I really like that kind of thinking as well as computer problem-solving. My teacher told me that a Computer Science and Philosophy course had just been launched at Oxford, and I was really excited! But neither my teacher nor I had a very good idea of what would be involved on the course. I got into contact with the Oxford Computer Science Department, and ended up asking so many questions that the professor posted told me loads about the course that wasn't available in the prospectus at all. As there were no past papers available, he pointed me towards the Computer Science papers available online. By the time my interview came around, I knew loads more about the subject than people who hadn't asked the department, and now I do graduate research in the same department.'

Of course, this advice **also applies** to more general questions about the university itself.

Because, as you probably already know, it's not **only** the course specifications, or chance of influencing their career prospects in the future, that attracts students to specific universities.

There's also the question of **league tables**, which probably influence many students more than they should. League tables are available from *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Complete University Guide*, which is often reproduced by *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* or *The Sunday Times*. They assess universities and individual courses for each subject. Some of the ratings from *The Complete University Guide* (CUG) are reproduced below in **Inset Four**.

The *Complete University Guide* league tables are assessed using **eight different criteria** - most of which they share in common with other league tables, although these vary according to each organisation which issues a table. In all of the league tables, between five and 17 criteria are used. The information for the criteria is gathered by various different survey, research and statistics associations.

These are:

- **Student Satisfaction.** Students are asked for their opinions on the teaching quality of their universities (confidentially!) by the National Student Survey, and their views are collated to make a score.
- **Research Quality.** The average quality of the research undertaken (by graduate students and staff) at each university is assessed by the Research Assessment Exercise.
- **Entry Standards.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) calculates the average UCAS tariff score of new students under 21 who are entering the university.
- **Student: Staff Ratio.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) measures the average staffing level of each university (high scores are given to institutions with fewer students per staff member, as the staff are then judged to have more time available to spend with each student).
- **Academic Services Spend.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) divides the money spent by each university on academic services by the total number of students, arriving at an average for the amount of money spent on each student.
- **Facilities Spend.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) divides the money spent by each university on student and staff facilities by the total number of students, arriving at an average for the amount of money spent on each student.
- **Good Honours.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) calculates the proportion of firsts and upper seconds gained by students at each university.
- **Graduate Prospects.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) measures the average employability of the graduates from each university.

- **Completion.** HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) finds figures for the proportion of undergraduate students enrolled who have completed their degrees at the same university (as opposed to those who drop out during a course).

Most league tables use pretty similar criteria to this to assess and rank all the different universities. However, controversially, *The Guardian's* league tables do not factor in any measure of an institution's research output; it also compares each student's entry qualifications with their degree result, creating a measure of how much students have improved during their course of study. Because of these two factors, *The Guardian's* league tables are sometimes thought of as being more orientated towards students.

But the *Complete University Guide's* league table is more representative of general opinion, and is the one most commonly used, so this is the one which I've used for the rankings in **Inset Four**. All ratings given are from *The Complete University Guide League Table 2012*, unless stated otherwise, and are the property of that organisation - but I've included *The Guardian's* overall Top Ten for comparison. The full *Guardian* league tables can be found online for free, as can the league tables from *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*; although, sadly, *The Times* is behind a pay wall. www.Getting-in.com also has high-quality university and subject profiles based partly on these lists.

Remember that the **subject tables** are very important; perhaps even more so than the general university league tables, especially if you want to do postgraduate research. Many universities - SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies, based in London) is a good example - offer world-renowned courses in a few subjects, but tend to get sidelined in league tables because the other courses they offer are sometimes treated as 'afterthoughts.'

Inset Four: League Tables

Table One: Overall League Table Rankings (Complete University Guide)

<i>First:</i> Cambridge	<i>Second:</i> Oxford	<i>Third:</i> Imperial College London
<i>Fourth:</i> LSE (London School of Economics)	<i>Fifth:</i> Durham	<i>Sixth:</i> St Andrew's
<i>Seventh:</i> UCL (University College London)	<i>Eighth:</i> Warwick	<i>Ninth:</i> Lancaster
<i>Tenth:</i> Bath		

Table Two: Overall League Table Rankings (Guardian)

<i>First:</i> Cambridge	<i>Second:</i> Oxford	<i>Third:</i> St Andrew's
<i>Fourth:</i> LSE (London School of Economics)	<i>Fifth:</i> UCL (University College London)	
<i>Sixth:</i> Warwick	<i>Seventh:</i> Lancaster	<i>Eighth:</i> Durham
<i>Tenth:</i> Imperial College London		<i>Ninth:</i> Loughborough

As you can see, there are certain consistent results across the two league tables. Cambridge and Oxford are first and second respectively in both tables (and in fact have swapped these two positions between themselves since the tables first appeared!) LSE (London School of Economics) is in fourth position in both tables; and in fact, with the exception of Bath's inclusion in the *Complete University Guide's* league table and Loughborough in *The Guardian's*, the same universities appear in both.

In the interests of not running out of room (!), I'm only listing the *Complete University Guide* subject rankings. However, the other league tables available online also have subject rankings for most degree courses: **check them out** at www.guardian.co.uk, www.independent.co.uk, and www.telegraph.co.uk

When looking at these subject tables, you should bear in mind that not all the subjects referred to are included by these names in the degrees. Many of them are included because they are parts of a wider course or a course with a different name: for example, the University of Cambridge comes first for Biological Sciences because of its great Natural Sciences degree - you will have to study other subjects alongside them.

Table Three: Subject Tables (Complete University Guide)

Top three institutions for each subject, in order.

- **Accounting** - Bath, Warwick, LSE (London School of Economics)
- **Aeronautical & Manufacturing Engineering** - Cambridge, Bristol, Southampton
- **Agriculture & Forestry** - Nottingham, Reading, Harper Adams
- **American Studies** - Warwick, Leicester, Sussex
- **Anatomy & Physiology** - Cambridge, Cardiff, Oxford
- **Anthropology** - Cambridge, UCL (University College London), Oxford
- **Archaeology** - Cambridge, UCL (University College London), Durham
- **Architecture** - Cambridge, Bath, UCL (University College London)
- **Art & Design** - Edinburgh, UCL, Oxford
- **Biological Sciences** - Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College London
- **Building** - UCL, Loughborough, Nottingham
- **Business Studies** - UCL, Cambridge, Imperial College London
- **Celtic Studies** - Cardiff, Aberystwyth, Glasgow
- **Chemical Engineering** - Cambridge, Imperial College London, Loughborough
- **Chemistry** - Cambridge, Oxford, Durham

- **Civil Engineering** - Cambridge, Imperial College London, Bristol
- **Classics & Ancient History** - Oxford, Cambridge, Durham
- **Communications & Media Studies** - Warwick, East Anglia, Nottingham Trent
- **Computer Science** - Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College London
- **Dentistry** - King's College London, Bristol, Manchester
- **Drama, Dance & Cinematics** - Warwick, King's College London, Queen Mary
- **East & South Asian Studies:** Cambridge, Oxford, SOAS
- **Economics** - Cambridge, Oxford, LSE (London School of Economics)
- **Education** - Cambridge, Edinburgh, Stirling
- **Electrical & Electronic Engineering** - Cambridge, UCL (University College London), Southampton
- **English** - UCL (University College London), Oxford, Durham
- **Food Science** - King's College London, Nottingham, Newcastle
- **French** - Oxford, St Andrew's, Durham
- **General Engineering** - Oxford, Cambridge, Surrey
- **Geography & Environmental Science** - Cambridge, Oxford, LSE (London School of Economics)
- **Geology** - Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College London
- **German** - Oxford, Cambridge, Durham
- **History** - Durham, Cambridge, LSE (London School of Economics)
- **History of Art** - Cambridge, Courtauld Institute, Oxford
- **Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation & Tourism** - Surrey, Loughborough, Stirling
- **Iberian Languages** - Oxford, Cambridge, Durham
- **Italian** - Cambridge, Oxford, Leeds
- **Land & Property Management** - Cambridge, Glasgow, Reading
- **Law** - LSE (London School of Economics), Cambridge, Oxford
- **Librarianship & Information Management** - Loughborough, Sheffield, Robert Gordon
- **Linguistics** - Lancaster, Oxford, Edinburgh
- **Materials Technology** - Cambridge, Nottingham, Imperial College London
- **Mathematics** - Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College London
- **Mechanical Engineering** - Cambridge, Imperial College London, Sheffield
- **Medicine** - Oxford, Edinburgh, UCL (University College London)
- **Middle Eastern & African Studies** - Oxford, St Andrew's, Cambridge
- **Music** - Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol
- **Nursing** - Edinburgh, York, Southampton
- **Pharmacology & Pharmacy** - Nottingham, East Anglia, Bath
- **Philosophy** - Oxford, LSE (London School of Economics), Cambridge
- **Physics & Astronomy** - Cambridge, Oxford, St Andrew's

- **Politics** - Oxford, Cambridge, Sheffield
- **Psychology** - Cambridge, Oxford, UCL (University College London)
- **Russian & East European Languages** - Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrew's
- **Social Policy** - LSE (London School of Economics), Edinburgh, Bath)
- **Social Work** - Bath, Lancaster, York
- **Sociology** - Cambridge, LSE (London School of Economics), Durham
- **Sports Science** - Loughborough, Durham, Edinburgh
- **Theology & Religious Studies** - Oxford, Cambridge, Durham
- **Town & Country Planning** - Cambridge, UCL (University College London), Reading
- **Veterinary Medicine** - Glasgow, Liverpool, Nottingham

University league tables are not, of course, the be-all and end-all, but they do give some idea of which universities you could start off by looking at if you're thinking of doing a subject that you or your teachers or parents don't know very much about.

And they're a great way to immerse yourself in the university system and in your subject, which will make you **better informed** about your options.

I gave a quick explanation of the term 'polytechnic' in **Inset Two**, because the terms 'polytechnic' and 'former polytechnic' are so often thrown around by newspapers, university guide writers and other commentators. Because polytechnics only became universities in 1992/1993, many older adults forget that many people don't remember a time when they were separate from universities. I hope that **Inset Two** has cleared up any confusion you may have had around the term.

However, polytechnics aren't the only sub-category of universities. There are some other terms which are often bandied around, and in some cases these can be a guide to the priorities and the character of the university you're considering. Although universities are increasingly leaving their specific histories behind them and offering pretty similar experiences, it's useful to know what these terms mean as you navigate different options for a place to spend your three or four student years. Below is a list of the different categories of universities, and in **Inset Five** there's a list of which universities fall into which categories.

Some of these categories are based on loose and to some degree unofficial criteria, such as the date of foundation or material they're made out of (*e.g.* 'plate glass' or 'red brick')! Other groups are formal associations, which aim to collaborate on research or to lobby the government together in order to have their interests represented. You can find out more about all of the different types of universities at **Getting-In's** comprehensive online university guide.

Knowing about these groups can be useful in helping you to interpret **articles and other commentary** about universities which frequently uses these terms. Although research into a university can never replace an open day or in-person visit, knowing about a group is a short cut to getting an idea of a university which is too far away to visit or which you don't have time for. Below is an explanation of each term.

- **Ancient Universities.** These are the universities which were founded before the end of the 19th century. Although they're called 'ancient,' they're not quite prehistoric - mostly, they were founded in the medieval or Renaissance periods. As you'll know if you've read the 'Timeline of Universities' in **Inset One**, the oldest is Oxford, founded over 800 years ago. You'll notice that most are Scottish, and Durham, in fact, wasn't founded until 1832: before its establishment as the third university in England, students who opted not to attend Oxford or Cambridge went north to Scotland or overseas to Europe.
- **Red Brick Universities.** The phrase 'red brick universities' refers literally to the type of pressed red brick popular in the Victorian era, and colloquially to six English universities founded during the Victorian era. These are also known as 'civic' universities, as they are located in city centres, and mostly evolved from private research facilities. They sought to differentiate themselves from the existing English universities, Oxford, Cambridge and Durham by focussing on sciences rather than arts, abandoning the 'college' system, and admitting applicants of any background and religious affiliation. (England's first three universities only allowed Anglican students to enter.) Nowadays, although several of the 'red brick' universities still have strong science facilities, neither they nor the 'ancient universities' are particularly focussed on any one discipline. Although the phrase 'red brick;' refers precisely to institutions founded during the nineteenth century, the term 'red brick' is often used to describe any university founded before the expansion of the university system in 1963. This serves to differentiate them from the later 'plate glass' universities. There's a perception that 'red brick' universities are more academically challenging than 'plate glass' universities, largely because having been around longer means that they've had more time to build up reputations for good research. However, this is quite an old-fashioned perception, and you'd do better to look at league tables and employment figures which are more up to date.
- **Plate Glass Universities.** These are universities created during the 1960s, after the Robbins Report recommended that all Colleges of Technology should become universities, and new universities be built. They get their name from the large expanses of glass that are just as characteristic of the 1960s as the distinctive pressed red brick is of the Victorian era. For obvious reasons, these universities aren't places to go if what you value is old traditions, classical architecture or a long list of historical alumni, but these factors are pretty irrelevant to your enjoyment of the actual course! When these universities were founded, they had a heavier focus on undergraduate teaching (as opposed to research), but the older

universities have mostly caught up. Many of the plate glass universities still have a stronger focus on teaching skills rather than abstract research, but this is by no means a hard and fast rule.

- **New Universities.** Most of these are former polytechnics - I've covered the history of polytechnics fairly comprehensively in **Inset Two**, so I won't go over it again here. They are also sometimes known as '**post-1994 universities.**' These universities are often represented by a group called the Coalition of Modern Universities (CMU) which campaigns on issues which affect these types of universities in particular.
- **University Colleges and Colleges of Higher Education** are getting more and more attention of late. These institutions do not have university status, but they can award degrees. However, many of them opt to teach students degree courses, and then have the actual degrees awarded by a nearby university. They tend to focus on more **vocational subjects**, although this rule is not universal by any means. Because they typically admit students with lower grades, and are more welcoming of non-A-Level qualifications such as BTECs, they are thought of as less academically challenging and less reputable by some people, but many of them have very high employment rates. Some, such as the Guildhall School of Music and Drama or the Glasgow School of Art, are internationally known for the quality of their non-academic teaching. A higher education college or university college is probably not your best option if you want to do postgraduate study or enter a very academically competitive career such as law or politics, but if you're looking for supportive teaching, practical skills, and good employment rates then they're great choices.
- **The Russell Group.** This term is often used as synonymous with 'academically good' by newspaper commentators or ambitious teachers - despite the fact that it leaves out several universities which regularly rank in the top ten in league tables, such as St Andrews, Durham and Exeter. The Russell Group is made up of 20 very research-focused universities, whose Vice Chancellors regularly confer over tea and cake at Russell Square, London! There is a student union called the Aldwych Group which represents the interests of Russell Group students, but as an undergraduate you don't have to worry about it too much. But if you hear someone say something like 'she's only applying to Russell Group unis,' it will generally mean that she's ambitious academically.
- **The 1994 Group.** Guess when this group was founded? That's right, **1994!** It's similar to the Russell Group, but with a larger focus on promoting great teaching as well as great research. Like the Russell Group, it's not really something that undergraduates need to worry about - if you hear the word thrown about in newspapers *etc*, don't worry about it too much.
- **The N8 Group.** Guess how many universities are in this group? That's right, **8!** (Academics are sooo creative!) It's a group of universities from the north of England who collaborate on cutting-edge scientific and medical research. If you're looking to go on to postgraduate learning in these areas, one of these universities is a pretty good bet.

- **Universitas 21.** This is a group of universities from all across the world, and four of them are in Britain. They offer great opportunities to collaborate with other students from universities in other countries. The original aim is to collaborate on research, but there are also extra-curricular opportunities for students including an Erasmus-like **exchange scheme**. So if you have an international outlook on life, these could open up doors for you.

A list of which universities fit into which category can be seen below in **Inset Five**.

Inset Five: Different Types of University and HE College

This inset lists the different categories of universities, explaining which universities fall into which category. I've also included a list of those higher education colleges and university colleges which award university-level degrees, and can be applied to through UCAS.

Table One: Different Types Of Universities

Ancient Universities

Oxford, Cambridge, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, St Andrew's, Glasgow, Durham

Red Brick Universities (*Universities marked with an asterisk are frequently referred to as 'Red Brick' but do not fit the exact 'Red Brick' definition*)

Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, *Wales (Aberystwyth), *Wales (Bangor), *Cardiff, *Dundee, *Exeter, *Hull, *Wales (Lampeter), *Leicester, *Newcastle, *Nottingham, *Queen's University of Belfast, *Reading, *Southampton, *Swansea

Plate Glass Universities

Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunel, City, Cranfield, East Anglia, Essex, Heriot-Watt, Keele, Kent, Lancaster, Loughborough, Salford, Stirling, Strathclyde, Surrey, Sussex, Warwick, Ulster, York

New Universities/ CMU Group (*Universities marked with an asterisk are new universities which are not part of CMU*)

Abertay Dundee, Anglia Ruskin, Bath Spa, *Bournemouth, Bolton, Bedfordshire, Birmingham City, Brighton, Central Lancashire, Coventry, *De Montfort, Derby, *East London, *Edge Hill, Glamorgan, Glasgow Caledonian, Gloucestershire, Greenwich, *Hertfordshire, *Huddersfield, Kingston, Leeds Metropolitan, *Lincoln, *Liverpool Hope, *Liverpool John Moores, London Metropolitan, London South Bank, *Manchester Metropolitan, Middlesex, Napier, *Northumbria, *Nottingham Trent, Northampton, *Oxford Brookes, *Plymouth, *Portsmouth, *Robert Gordon, Roehampton, *Sheffield

Hallam, Staffordshire, Southampton Solent, Sunderland, Teesside, Thames Valley, *West of England, West of Scotland, Westminster, Wolverhampton, *Canterbury Christ Church, *Chester, *Chichester, *Queen Margaret, *Winchester, *York St John, *Cumbria

University Colleges

University College Birmingham, Bishop Grosseteste University College, The Arts University College at Birmingham, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, University College for the Creative Arts, University College Falmouth, Harper Adams University College, Newman University College, Birmingham, Norwich University College of the Arts, St May's University College

Higher Education Colleges

Bell College, Burton College, City College (Birmingham), Edinburgh College of Art, Glasgow College of Nautical Studies, Glasgow School of Art, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Hull York Medical School, Leeds College of Music, Royal Scottish Academy of Music, Rose Bruford College, College of St Mark & St John, Scottish Agricultural College, Trinity and All Saints, Trinity College of Music, UHI Millennium Institute, Union Theological College, Wirral Metropolitan College, Writtle College

Russell Group

Queen's University (Belfast), Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics (LSE), Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL (University College London), Warwick

1994 Group Universities

Bath, Birkbeck (University of London), Durham, East Anglia, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths (University of London), Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary (University of London), SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), St Andrew's, Surrey, Sussex, Warwick, York

N8 Group

Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, York

Universitas 21 (UK institutions)

Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Nottingham

Of course, there are many other reasons besides the academic that drive a student's choice of university. You might want to be in a particular part of the country - the city or the countryside, near your family or far away (!) - or you might value a certain ethos or social scene which can be found in some universities. For instance, Cambridge and Reading are officially the two most bike-friendly university towns!

However, I've given the most importance to academic and career considerations here because these are really what should drive you to a 'shortlist' of universities. You have the **rest of your life** to pursue a certain scene or atmosphere, and although these things are important during uni, you'll be able to find them in most places. For instance, there's no reason you can't party a lot at a campus university, start up a club for your particular interest during your time as a student, or get to know a brand new city you've never visited before. For great nights out, evenings in and other good deals, make sure you know your way around **Getting-In's** special student deals section before you start at uni.

Case Study: Becky, 19, says, 'When I arrived at my campus uni, I got bored pretty quickly. There was almost nothing to do in the evenings, and the town was miles away! But I had so many mates that felt the same way that we decided something had to be done. It was easy to get permission to hold 'Friday Night Flings' in the student bar once a week, and everyone had so much fun we usually got together enough people to club together for a eight-seater taxi into town and back! I met so many new people when I was promoting the new night that I now feel a lot less lonely. Now, I'm running for Student Activities Officer for the Student Union, so that I can organise loads more fun events - I never thought of myself as a really organised person before, but I love putting on nights and seeing everybody partying together is worth all the hard work. Who knows... maybe I'll even get into events management once I've got my degree!'

The truth is that whatever university you're at, you're sure to find out a lot more about yourself as you settle into the challenging new life. It's not wise to stake your whole three years on convenient 'retail therapy' facilities or a good cricket club: you don't know if these things will still be important to you in a couple of years' time.

So the best way to choose a university is to decide a **shortlist** of the ones that will be best for your education and your future career prospects. Then you can pick the five whose student life particularly appeals to you.

Open Days

Open days are an important part of two processes - choosing the university you want to go to, and getting into your choices.

The number of open days you're able to attend will probably depend largely on how close they are to your home and how much time your parents have to take you, or to organise a train or coach for you. Your school or sixth-form college should be able to give you information about open days, as the universities will send them lots of information about the days as well as prospectuses.

Universities *want* you to attend open days - they need new students, and the open days are a chance to advertise what they have to offer you.

With the tuition fees rise, many universities are reporting that more and more students are attending their open days. More parents are turning up as well, full of questions about the universities' value for money. So, the open days will be crowded, but don't let them put you off.

Remember, **an open day is not an interview**. Don't worry about asking questions that might sound silly, or about the kind of impression that you're making. This is the time when the university is trying to attract *you*. Feel free to ask anything you want, and to approach the current student guides, the professors and the administrative staff.

Attending the official lectures and talks can be useful in giving you a feel for the place, and for the general university experience, but is not always useful in helping you choose between universities. You're pretty unlikely to be taught in the end by the same professor who's delivering the lecture, as universities typically have hundreds of staff. Plus, even in 2012 some universities still aren't aware that most students will find out information on things like course modules and typical entrance requirements online long before they attend an open day (and finding out about these things early is something I highly recommend)! This means that some open day talks can end up wasting hours of your visit listening to information that you know about already.

A better idea is to carve out your own unofficial open day. Here are a few ways that you can get behind the facade of the official open day and discover what the atmosphere at the university is really like:

- **Explore the campus and the students' rooms.** If you're on an official open day, you'll probably be offered an official guided tour led by a current student. However, you might get a more representative idea of life at the uni by sloping off and taking a look at the typical student rooms, dining hall, and lecture theatres yourself without an official guide. And make sure you get a look at the student bar - this is often the hub of student life, and will probably show signs of what life is like at the uni!
- **Read the unofficial materials.** Official materials are prospectuses, course outlines, application pamphlets *etc*, and you'll be handed bundles of them at every open day. But as these are used partly for advertising, they don't give an impartial view, and are sometimes not really representative. Plus, a lot of the information on there is available online - and you don't want to **waste time** on your open day finding out information that **you can read at home** in your spare time. Alternative sources of information on university life include the **posters** for clubs, societies and social events hanging on the walls, and any **student newspapers** that are hanging around - these are designed to appeal to students at the

university, so they'll talk about the things that are really important to those studying there. There'll also be information about complaints or problems that you won't be made aware of: if the sports teams are badly funded, student politics are suppressed, the professors sound out of touch or something else important to you is missing, then you can cross the university off your list.

- **Stay overnight.** Not many students do this, but it can be really useful if you want to get the feel of the place. Although many open days are in the summer, when not many students are around, spending the night in a place can still give you a **feel for the nightlife**. And if you're travelling with one or more friends, it's even easier to suss out where the fun lies in a town! Even if you're with parents, you can take a walk in the evening and look at what the town centre feels like.
- **Plan a schedule.** If you just turn up at an open day with no real idea about what you want to see or find out about the university, you'll still get the open day experience. Most universities have special schedules set up to process prospective applicants, with timetabled activities - such as a sample lecture or tour of the campus - throughout the day. However, if you can get hold of this material **beforehand** (many universities send the schedule to you when you register), you can work out which parts of the day you actually want to take part in. Once you've crossed off some less necessary ones, you can think about how to fill in the rest: with a walk around town, a hunt to try to talk to a particular lecturer, a visit to the university Careers Office or sports hall...
- **Walk.** Many people attend open days with their parents, and often take advantage of their parents' cars to ferry them between the city and the campus, or the halls and the library. But unless you have your own car and will be able to pay for parking and petrol while studying - which very few students can do - you'll be walking or taking the bus while you study. Using these modes of transport on the open day will give you a better idea of **what the uni is like for students** than being ferried around by your Dad!
- **Ask, ask, ask.** How many lectures a week? How many students per class? How easy is it to set up your own club? **Just ask.**

Some people take open days one step further. As well as finding out about the university, they see the day as their first step towards **getting in** to their chosen university. It's true that intelligent questions can make you stand out, but it's probably equally true that busy tutors on open days which might see thousands of students passing through for a few hours are unlikely to link your intelligent question with a name on a UCAS Track form several months later.

If you really want to impress on an open day, some people are now recommending that you get started with the networking long before you step into the university - perhaps by following an academic on Twitter or 'friending' the institution on Facebook!

Some days it can feel as if the whole world's on Facebook- from your ex posting a new profile pic of her and her new boyfriend to your gran using your 'baby name' on your wall - and the truth is that many university lecturers and academics now use **social media** as well. A lot of academics use Twitter to give news from conferences and other events, and if you introduce yourself over the platform, they'll be a lot more likely to remember speaking to you at an open day. As Ashwar found out in the [Case Study](#), the internet can be a great networking tool for university applicants. Check out which companies are advertising jobs or internships in **Getting-In's** employment section.

Oxford and Cambridge - Are They For You?

Many - in fact, most - people don't even consider the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, commonly known collectively as 'Oxbridge,' when they're applying to university. However, out of those students who are most worried about their **personal statements**, **exam grades** and **other strategies for getting in**, a significant proportion are looking to **get into** one of the Oxford or Cambridge colleges. **Getting-In** helps out a lot of students from all sorts of different backgrounds who have their minds set on one of these universities, and who are prepared to put in extraordinary amounts of energy, dedication and commitment to **getting in** to them.

There are all kinds of resources available for Oxford or Cambridge hopefuls, both online and offline. Some of these are less reputable than others: the University of Cambridge started requesting photographs along with applications some time ago because of businesses that had sprung up in various foreign countries offering students the chance to send a cleverer substitute to go to Cambridge and sit the interviews instead! But most of these resources can be **genuinely very helpful** to students who find the whole Oxbridge system of applications bewildering or intimidating.

For instance:

- **Getting-In** offers personal statement help tailored to each individual student, in order to make your personal statement stand out in the eyes of admissions tutors. Coaching you through your personal statement writing can be very useful, as this is the first thing that admissions tutors will read about you.

Many people think of 'Oxbridge' as a single entity - and often students considering applications to Oxford or Cambridge don't think about 'which one' until they're at a surprisingly late stage in their decision-making. This is probably because the two universities are so often grouped together in popular culture - and in teachers' minds. But at some point, you will have to decide whether you want to go for **light blue (Cambridge)** or **dark blue (Oxford)**. There's a special rule which states that you can't apply for both.

Neither university is 'better.' One or another of them is always at the top of the national league table, with the other always second - although both are overtaken by some other universities in subject tables. They're also both generally in the Top Five universities in the world, jostling with American universities Harvard, Yale and Princeton. You can compare the CUG league table information for different subjects in **Inset Four**, but for most subjects, each university offers a great education.

If you read a lot of old books or have old-fashioned relatives giving you advice, you might come to the conclusion that Oxford is for arty types while Cambridge is for science. This was true for many years - but now both universities have equally rigorous research going on in all disciplines.

However, there are some significant differences in **the ways that the two universities teach subjects**. For instance, if you want to do Politics, you'll have to choose whether to combine it with Philosophy and Economics at Oxford (PPE) or with Psychology and Sociology (PPS) at Cambridge - quite a difference! The best thing to do if you have strong ideas about what you want to study within your subject is to take a really good look at the two course structures, which are available from the Department websites, and decide which appeals.

Extra-curricular activities are also an important consideration. Robert Webb, one half of the famous 'Mitchell and Webb' *Peep Show* duo, has said that he went to Cambridge almost solely for the sake of his acting and comedy career: the university's '**Footlights**' acting society is where half of Monty Python (John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle), got together, and has also launched stars like Stephen Fry, Emma Thompson, and 'Borat' Sacha Baron Cohen. Meanwhile, Oxford's **Poetry Society** puts on events with some of the world's most famous literary figures for very cheap prices or for free. So if you have a strong passion besides your degree subject, it's definitely worth combing the internet to find out which university has the more popular and better-funded society, club or sports team. Although remember that if books are your thing, **Getting-In's** excellent used 'bought and sold' classified section is a great place to locate what you need.

Ultimately, the choice of Oxford or Cambridge is like choosing between any other universities - think about the **teaching** and your **extra-curricular priorities**. Both universities have roughly equal employment rates. The best way to choose is to visit both of them and get a sense of the atmosphere and how it might suit you.

Although many people ask for advice from different sources about applying to Oxford and Cambridge, a vast majority of questions appear to be about the following three areas:

1. **Intimidation.** Do they take people like me at Oxford or Cambridge? Am I good enough?
2. **Interviews?** What are they, how do they work, and how can I do well in them?

3. Colleges? How do I choose a college? Why do I have to pick one?

None of these questions have easy answers.

One seemingly problematic question, however, does have a straightforward answer: if your grades are good enough, you write a stellar **personal statement**, and you perform well at interview, then Oxford and Cambridge *do* take ‘people like you.’

*Case Study: Mohamed, 20, says, ‘After moving to Britain from Sudan, I’d only been in the British education system since I was 12, and not many people from my school went to university. But I’d always got great grades in Science and Maths, and I decided that what I really wanted was to be a doctor. My teacher suggested that I apply to some good unis as I was predicted all A*s, so I looked at the league tables for Medicine. When I saw Oxford I was a little scared, but my Mum had heard of Oxford and she wanted me to ‘reach for the stars,’ so I put in an application. I was terrified when I first went up, scared that I wouldn’t fit in, but most people were really nice and I totally loved the course. Now I volunteer and play football for my college in my spare time, and visit schools as part of the university Access Team to talk through the applications process with people who are intimidated by what they’ve heard about Oxford.’*

It isn’t **naïve or silly** to think that you may be held back or discriminated against when applying to Oxford, Cambridge or any other high-profile and exclusive university. For centuries, this was the case: neither Oxford or Cambridge admitted students from any religion besides Anglican Christianity (even excluding alternative forms of Christianity, like Catholicism or Orthodox Christianity!) till the University Tests Act in 1871, some colleges at the universities didn’t admit their first state school pupils till after World War Two, and Magdalene College at Cambridge didn’t admit women till a shockingly late 1988!

But a lot has changed in Britain since those times - and the current Oxford and Cambridge admissions policy has changed too. This kind of discrimination is thought by most people - other academics, teachers, inspectors and politicians - to be a thing of the past. Nowadays, staff at both universities are aware that students from all kinds of different backgrounds don’t only **deserve** to be admitted, but **bring great value and prestige** to the universities which educated them. A great example is Zadie Smith, the mixed-race, female candidate from an inner London comprehensive, who went to interview at Kings’ College at the University of Cambridge as an apprehensive A-Level student, and immediately after graduation published the first of three prize-winning books which have made her one of Britain’s most respected novelists. Smith’s achievements, and those of many other graduates like her, have inspired other prospective students, researchers and sponsors to think well of the university, and the professors there, at Oxford and elsewhere are well aware that discrimination would make them lose out on valuable outstanding students.

Because Oxford and Cambridge were so elitist for such a long time, there's a lot of suspicion and mistrust around the universities' dealings with state school pupils. The furore over the universities' high levels of private school pupils admitted to their courses (almost 50%, when only 9% of British children are educated in private schools) surfaces regularly.

In one famous case in 2000, even then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (later Prime Minister) got involved, publicly criticising admissions tutors who rejected state school pupil Laura Spence in her application to study Medicine at Magdalene College, Oxford. The fact that Laura had 4 As at A-Level (this is before the A* grade was introduced), and won a scholarship to famous American university Harvard after Oxford rejected her, were taken by Gordon Brown to show that she'd been discriminated against - either by a simple dislike of state school pupils or by an unfair interview slanted towards a certain social 'class' (like the one Pete experienced in the [Case Study](#) in '**Chapter One: All About University**'). However, this criticism has since been thought of as unfair: almost all Oxford and Cambridge applicants are predicted all As or A*s, and Laura was rejected as one of 22 people applying for 5 places.

It's true that Oxford and Cambridge are very competitive places to **get into**, and that high grades alone won't be enough to secure a place. But the 45%-50% private school pupil rate is reflected in the proportion of students who apply. Statistics have shown that once you decide to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, your school doesn't have an impact on how likely you are to be admitted.

This is also good to know for private school pupils who fear they may be rejected in an attempt to boost 'diversity' quotas. Neither university has any kind of quota in place and, as is shown above, private and state school pupils **who apply** have an equal chance of **getting in**.

Both Oxford and Cambridge admissions tutors are trained in the need to be aware of the need for a diverse university community, and both of the universities have dedicated Access Departments where a good deal of work is done on encouraging applicants from state schools, from different countries, and from schools which don't have many people going to Oxbridge or to university. Plus, each college *also* has dedicated access workers, meaning that there's plenty of information and support out there for bright A-Level students who would like to **get in** to Oxford or Cambridge but who are feeling confused or intimidated.

Admissions tutors don't 'judge blind' on a student's module marks, but always take a range of factors, including educational and social background, into consideration when making their decisions. No university in the UK has a version of the 'affirmative action' policies which are almost universal in the US university system, in which students from minority backgrounds *must* make up a certain quota of admissions - and they don't enforce a certain proportion of women, state school

students, or working class students either. But admissions tutors *do* take all the factors they know about - through your personal statement, reference, interview if you attend one, and their own knowledge of your school - into consideration when making their decisions.

When you're deciding whether to choose one of these universities for a slot on your UCAS Track form, there's **loads** of information, advice and support available to you. **Take advantage of it!**

Depending on your school and your teachers, the advice you get there can be the most valuable help you'll get, or - well, not particularly useful!

Case Study: Emma, 19, says, 'I went to a very good independent school from ages 11 - 18, and they really encouraged us to apply to Oxford or to Cambridge, putting on lots of special personal statement and interview help. We even went up to Cambridge by bus so that we could get a look at the different colleges! Our English teacher took us to the famous, sixteenth century Kings' College, which has a reputation for a high proportion of state school pupils, and said 'Look at it, girls, it's a very beautiful Gothic building. But only look - they won't want people from our school.' So I applied elsewhere. But one of my classmates did apply for Kings' anyway, and she got an unconditional offer! I think our English teacher was a bit embarrassed that she'd given us advice that turned out not to be true.'

Sometimes, like Emma, students are given **wrong or misleading advice** about Oxbridge and its colleges. This bad advice sometimes comes from out-of-date sources, and sometimes from the teacher's personal knowledge or experience, which isn't always relevant for everybody. Just because a teacher once met someone snobbish who'd been to Oxford, for instance, doesn't mean that everybody there is snobby! You'd often do better to talk to **current or recent students** of the universities as well as, or even instead of, the teachers - if you don't know any personally, then the best thing to do is to investigate **Getting-In (www.getting-in.com)**, which offers all sorts of help and advice. (This piece of advice applies to students applying to any university, not only Oxford or Cambridge.)

However, a more common problem is a lack of any advice about, or understanding of, the Oxford and Cambridge systems, including the application systems. This can leave a lot of people intimidated. Many prospective students aren't as lucky as Emma, and most schools do not include such a lot of advice, support, and extra-curricular help for hopeful applicants.

If your school doesn't offer much support, then there are a few things which you can do off your own bat to learn about Oxford and Cambridge, to decide if either of them is right for you, and - hopefully! - maximise your chances of **getting in**.

- Trying to **talk to a current student** is always one of the most valuable things that you can do. Although, obviously, people's experiences of their universities differ hugely, a current or recent student will have an 'insiders' view' into life there. If your school hosts a visit from one of the universities' Access departments, make sure that you go if you're considering applying.
- **Check out the websites!** This may seem like obvious advice, but the truth is that you'll give yourself an advantage over the other applicants, and maximise your chances of **getting in**, if you make use of the full potential of the universities' websites. Both sites have individual sites for each college *and* for each department, and as these contain resources for current students as well as prospective students, they're really useful in giving you an insight into what life at that university would be like. This includes detailed descriptions of each module in each course, so that you can get a really good idea of what you'd be taking, and current **lecture lists** for the year. If you read the lecture list for your course and think that you'd love to jump out of bed to attend the classes listed, it's a great sign! (Although some have very grandiose titles that you shouldn't be put off by - you'll get up to speed quickly once you start the course.) Many departments also have **past exam papers** available to read online, giving you a real sense of the kind of issues you could be thinking about when you're there.
- **Ask your teacher about access days.** Both universities put on free weekends and special kinds of 'open day' where state school pupils can experience life in an Oxbridge college. They work together to do this, and your teacher will be able to find out specific dates for you. It's best to ask about this early on in Year 12, if no one's mentioned it to you already, as places fill up fast. However, these weekends aren't competitive - you just have to be recommended by a teacher - and aren't part of the application process at all. They're simply designed to introduce you to the universities and to give you an example of the tutorial style that will be used there. If you're at a private school, you're less likely to get a place on one of these weekends - this is because the universities assume that you probably have teachers who either went to Oxbridge or know a lot about the universities, and will be able to give you an idea of what it's like.
- If your heart is set on light blue, apply through the **Cambridge Special Access Scheme**. This is designed for students who have had difficult learning experiences which stopped them from **getting their best grades**. This may be due to **illness or bereavement** (though it has to be serious illness, such as a stay in hospital or a debilitating mental illness - not having a cold the week before your exams!) but the scheme is also designed for people who have attended schools from which a small proportion of people typically go on to university. However, you can only apply through this scheme if it is **also** the case that your family has little or no tradition of going to university. (So if you go to a bad school, but your parents both went to university, you probably won't be able to use the Special Access Scheme.) To apply for this scheme, you will still need to have good grades, though they

might not have to be quite as good. Cambridge usually interviews students with at least 3 As at AS-Level, so the Special Access Scheme might get you considered if you have 3 Bs, but not 3 Cs or Ds. You will also need the **support of your teacher**, as applications for the scheme are made through schools or colleges. If your circumstances don't quite fit the scheme's criteria, or if you want to go to Oxford, don't worry - both universities state explicitly that they take the type of school that you went to, and anything your teacher may have included on your UCAS reference, into account. (With league tables available online for schools as well as universities, it's quite easy for admissions tutors to find this information.) If you're applying to Cambridge, you can also include details of any difficulties with your schooling on your SAQ form (more about this form in '**Chapter Four: Navigating the Application Process.**')

So, that's **intimidation dealt with.**

I hope I've shown that no matter what background you're from, if you get brilliant grades, write a stellar personal statement, do well in any extra exams or tests and make a great impression at interview, your chances of **getting in** are just as good whether you're polished and at home in those universities, or don't know anyone who's studied there at all. There's **lots more advice** about Oxford and Cambridge's interviews and exam system in '**Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work,**' so have a look at that chapter if you want to find out more about how to make a good impression.

Now I'm going to turn to the third problem that seems to confuse Oxbridge applicants: **colleges.**

As you'll know if you've read the section above about different types of universities, all the 'ancient universities' used to be **collegiate** universities: meaning that they were composed of several different colleges. Nowadays, though, most of those colleges have merged or stopped being independent, and now students just apply directly to St Andrews, or to Edinburgh. However, Oxford, Cambridge and Durham are still made up of several separate colleges.

You may hear the **Universities of London or of Wales** being described as 'collegiate' as well. However, in both these cases, the separate 'colleges' (institutions such as Imperial, Cardiff, or Birkbeck universities) are in essence separate universities, with their own research projects and no shared teaching or staff. You apply directly to these 'colleges,' and they are listed as their own institutions in league tables (as you can see in **Inset Four**).

The college system in the **University of Durham** is also slightly different to a traditional college structure: the colleges mainly exist as centres for residential and social things, and don't individually teach their students: more like the different accommodation halls at most normal

universities. Durham is different from other universities in that you are 'strongly encouraged' to state a preference for a certain college on your application form. However, like most other British universities, admissions decisions are made by the academic department which runs your course (e.g. the Modern Languages department for French, the Science department for Physics *etc*) and only if you're accepted by the department are you allotted a college.

The system at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge seems to be the one which causes most stress and worry to prospective applicants. At Oxford and Cambridge, colleges are not just for accommodation (although they arrange that as well). The staff at your college will arrange a lot of your teaching, and tutorials and seminars (as opposed to lectures) will mainly be given by staff at your college. So if, for example, you're studying Geography at Queen's College, Cambridge, you'll **live with** students from Queen's, go to **lectures** with Geography students from the whole university, and go to **classes** only with Geography students from Queen's.

This means that you do spend a lot of time in your college.

Colleges are also responsible for allocating places: most of the time, you apply to the college, not to the university. Both universities do allow students to make '**open applications**,' which allow all colleges to consider you, but applying to a specific college is recommended.

Oxford and Cambridge recommend it because they want to preserve the college system, which allows for the more intimate style of teaching which attracts students to the universities - and because they've been allocating places through colleges for almost 800 years, and are used to doing it that way!

I'd recommend applying to a particular college because open applications can end up allocating you to a college you didn't want. At both universities, a computer allocates each open application candidate a college which will interview them and consider them for admission - but these allocations are not quite random. Colleges are given open applications in a certain subject when they've had fewer students than usual applying for that subject. Some students like the idea of this, as they think it reduces competitiveness and gives them a better chance of **getting in**. But it **does risk** you ending up in a college which isn't particularly strong on your subject. Plus, open applications could go to *any* college - there's no way of **saying 'any college except these ones'**, or stating any kind of preference.

The most common way that open applications end up frustrating students is the case of female students very often being allocated to one of Cambridge's all-female colleges (the last all-female college in Oxford, St Hilda's, started accepting male students in 2008). Often, people making applications didn't realise that this could happen - and although all-female colleges are preferred

by many girls, others would rather be in a co-educational environment. People are also sometimes disappointed by being in a college far away from the city centre, or a very modern college that doesn't have traditional architecture.

So the best thing to do is to 'plump for' a college and apply there. It can be as simple as picking a name that you've heard of, or spotting a pretty building on an open day. Each college has its own website, so you can quickly check whether the college has a '**deal breaker**' for you - all-female? doesn't teach your subject? A college choice can be as trivial as you like, and shouldn't take even a fraction as long as choosing your university. After all, when you get there, if you don't like your college atmosphere you're **perfectly free to socialise outside** for the whole three years. You can always use **Getting-In's** great deals section to find 2-5-1 cocktails or dinners, after all!

However, some people **do** end up with strong preferences for colleges. These could come from:

- **Family or school tradition.** These are some of the strongest traditional reasons for picking a college, although of course they're much less relevant now. A few generations ago, people with a family or school history of attending a particular college were more likely to get a place there. Now that the universities are actively trying to **prevent elitism**, this doesn't really apply. However, some people still feel more comfortable in a college that they've been aware of all their lives.
- **Type of student admitted.** As mentioned above, some Cambridge colleges do not admit men. These are New Hall/Murray Edwards, Newnham and Lucy Cavendish. Obviously this means that men who apply there will definitely be rejected (although biologically 'male' transgender or transsexual students who identify as women can be admitted if they include information about their identification somewhere on their applications) - but it also means that female students who want boys around shouldn't apply to those! Similarly, Oxford's Harris Manchester and Cambridge's Clare Hall, Darwin, Hughes Hall, Lucy Cavendish, St Edmunds and Wolfson only admit mature students (over 21), so if that isn't you, don't apply to those colleges, and if you're a mature student who wants to feel really in the mainstream, don't apply either.
- **Subject courses.** Some colleges don't admit applicants for particular subjects. For example, if you're a sixth-former applying to do History of Art at Oxford, you'll have to choose from Christ Church, St Catherine's, St John's, St Peter's, Wadham and Worcester, while only 19 of Cambridge's undergraduate colleges offer Veterinary Medicine. A college not teaching a certain course doesn't reflect badly on the subject - it usually means that because relatively few people study, the college doesn't think it's worth employing professors to teach it. But you'll have no chance of **getting in** if you apply to a college that doesn't teach your subject. Meanwhile, some colleges do have very good reputations for certain subjects - for example, Trinity at Cambridge for Mathematics. This may make them

harder to **get into**, but will mean that you're taught by the very best when you get there. If you know a fair bit about your subject, you might decide to apply to a college where one of the top researchers in the field is based (for instance, some Science and Philosophy students are drawn to Oxford's New College because Richard Dawkins works from there) - although you should bear in mind that undergraduates are very unlikely to be taught by these high-profile people.

- **Location.** In the city centre, or the outskirts? Near the gym or the lecture hall? Both universities have colleges clumped around a river, which may appeal to you or put you off.
- **Funding.** If you're thinking of postgraduate learning, or you want to do lots of extra-curricular activities, you might consider applying for the 'richer' colleges. Students at colleges like Cambridge's St John's or Oxford's Merton may have more funding opportunities available. Check out '**Chapter Six: Fees, Finance and Funding**' for more on funding information.

But if you don't have any of these particular restrictions, feel free to just pick any college that appeals to you for whatever reason. Whether you choose King's at Cambridge for its famous **gay scene**, Christ Church at Oxford because it has the meadows where Lewis Carroll set **Alice in Wonderland**, or Emmanuel at Cambridge because of the high number of **ducks** roaming the grounds, most people quickly form attachments to their colleges once they're actually there.

***Case Study:** Yasmin, 20, says, 'Nobody from my family has been to Oxford or Cambridge and I had no idea what to expect from different colleges. My History teacher didn't have much advice either, though he said I should do history at Uni; when I told him I was applying to Oxford he was pleased but I was pretty much on my own for choosing a college. I looked at some of the colleges' websites but they only confused me - of course, every college said they were the best! In the end I decided to just make an open application and concentrate on working hard to get my grades. I got allocated to Wadham, which I'd never heard of, but they picked me and offered me a place! I'm Access Officer for my college this year, I do shifts at the student bar and play for Ladies' football. It's funny - I didn't know anything about the colleges at Oxford before I'm applied, but now I can't imagine living anywhere else. Go Wadham!'*

Choosing a college because you think it'll be 'easier to get in' is generally a mistake. Many people don't have their data right when they're working out which colleges are 'best.' Plus, although some reputations - like Trinity's competitiveness for Maths students - are well-founded, the **pooling system** at both universities tries to ensure that students who apply to competitive colleges aren't at a disadvantage. The pooling system is designed to make sure that those students who are **good enough to be admitted**, but have applied to a college which is very **oversubscribed** in their subject, have an equal chance of being admitted.

Say you do apply to Trinity for Maths, and the college knows it can only take 20 students but receives 200 applications. They may conclude that 25 or 30 of the students are good enough to study Maths at Cambridge, and will then put the 5 or 10 students that they didn't take back into the 'pool.' Meanwhile, a college not particularly known for Maths - perhaps King's or Sidney Sussex - might have received 30 or 40 Maths applicants, of which only 3 or 4 were good enough. If they have more places, they'll start to interview students from the 'pool.' So applying to a competitive college doesn't really mean that you have less of a chance of **getting into** the university.

To find out more about pooling, read on to the end of '**Chapter Four: Navigating The Application Process.**'

Chapter Four: Navigating The Application Process

UCAS

Ah, **UCAS**. The university entrance portal for hundreds of thousands of students applying to British universities and higher education colleges. The UCAS system is habitually saved on ‘favourites’ pages, stared at in bafflement, and navigated by teachers used to it changing on an almost yearly basis.

This section helps you find your way around the potentially confusing Track form and UCAS website, to understand the requirements for entering the admissions system and work out the best way for you to improve your chances of **getting in**. It’ll explain **grade requirements**, give **personal statement tips**, tell you what goes on your **reference**, give insights into how universities **process your application**, and help you navigate **clearing, pooling, and offers**. **Inset Six** below shows the UCAS timeline for important dates - with some extra dates added to make it more realistic!

The tests included in this timeline are explained in full in ‘**Chapter Six: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work.**’

Inset Six: Timeline of the Applications Process

Summer	- Start visiting some Open Days to explore the universities which seem interesting to you.
16 August	- AS-Level results released. You’ll find out which subject you got the best grades in and can think about the possibility of re-sitting any disappointing modules or work out a benchmark for which universities you might be able to get into.
Winter Term	- Visit any universities that you’re keen on but haven’t seen yet.
Mid-September	- UCAS opens for entries, and prospective students in Year 13 are able to register.
20 September	- Deadline for BMAT exam registration
9 October	- Last possible date for UKcat test
15 October	- Deadline for all courses at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and for Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine and Veterinary Science courses at any university.
4 November	- BMAT takes place
10 November	- Deadline for submission of written work to support Oxford (not Cambridge) applications.
December/January	- Interviews for Oxford, Cambridge and other universities/courses which

interview. Don't book a holiday for this time! (For more about interviews, see 'Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work.')

- 15 January** - Deadline for most courses. Universities have no obligation to consider an application made after this date; some of them might still consider you, but as most universities are so over-subscribed it's unlikely to happen unless you have a *really* good reason for not applying sooner.
- February** - HPAT takes place
- 22 February - 4 July** - This is the time period where you can apply one at a time for additional courses through UCAS Extra, if you haven't received any offers or have declined them all.
- 24 March** - Deadline for some art and design courses (known as 'Route B'). If you're unsure when your deadline is, you can find out through the course prospectuses.
- 31 March** - By now, universities should have sent out their offers for any applications received before the 15 January deadline. If you applied after this date however, you might still receive an offer in April and past then.
- May/June** - AS-Level, A-Level and STEP exams
- 9 May** - You need to have replied to all offers by this date in order to secure a place.
- 30 June** - Last date at which UCAS will forward your application to universities - although you may well not be considered if you're applying this late. Any applications made after this will be processed through Clearing.
- 16 August** - A-Level and AS-Level results, when your offers will be confirmed. If you didn't make your grades, this is when Clearing opens.

UCAS has recently proposed some sweeping **changes to the current system** (described at the end of this chapter), but for this year's round of applications you'll be facing the same system that's been in place for the last few years. If you need more guidance though, try reading more about this system with **Getting-In's** special advice section.

The basic UCAS application process involves picking **five universities** from the vast mass of Britain's higher educational institutions, writing a personal statement, and making sure that you get the grades. The whole system and all its jargon can sound pretty complicated and confusing, but that's what it boils down to.

The entire UCAS system is **online**, which confused the first applicants to use it but is now very popular as the easiest way to do things among a tech-savvy generation. Most schools and colleges will guide you through the initial UCAS registration, including providing you with the '**buzz word**'

you'll need to log on for the first time. This 'buzz word' identifies you through your school or college.

Once you have a profile, you'll need to fill it in with your contact information, schooling information, and a list of all your certified qualifications. These must be filled in **absolutely accurately** - when you get your offers you'll have to provide certificates, and if the grade on the certificate doesn't match the grade on the form, you'll lose your place.

If you realise or find out afterwards that you've made a mistake in this part of the form - even if it's nothing to do with your grades but an incorrect exam board or date - you **must contact UCAS and all universities still considering you** immediately! If you don't let them know the right information, they may reject you offhand - even if they've already made you an unconditional offer.

Similarly, you should make sure that your name is in the same format as on your exam entries and certificates, which can be complicated for people with more than one first name or who come from cultures which give names in a different way to the standard English 'first name surname.' The **exam centre numbers** can be found by clicking on 'find' and 'search.'

Most courses don't need information about your modules and units, but some of them - often in the science subjects in particular - do ask for this information. To check, look at the course prospectus or **e-mail the admissions team**. If you think you might apply for a course which needs this info, it's best to enter it just to be on the safe side. However, you can add this information later if you want to.

This space is also where you enter the results of the exams which some courses require you to take in addition to A-Levels - such as the BMAT, UKCAT or LNAT. There's more about these in '**Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work.**'

You'll also be asked to fill out answers to security questions. **Write these down!** It's pretty unlikely that someone you know will actually hack your UCAS account (however much your Mum may wish you were doing Dentistry not Drama!) so having them written down isn't a big security risk, and is likely to let you avoid the frustration of not remembering exactly how your first pet's name was spelled. A username will be generated, which you should also **write down**. The verification e-mail is used to confirm your e-mail address, and may take a while to come through.

You should use your most 'official-sounding' e-mail address here, as admissions tutors will see it; nothing offensive or sexual!

The personal details questions include questions used to work out how much you're entitled to in student grants and fees, and who should be paying them. The vast majority of students should choose the **'Local Education Authority'** from the **student support** question: this is the council-sized area near you which processes all your fees, loans and grants. UCAS will also ask for:

- **Your nationality** - this refers to your citizenship status, not your race, where you were born or where your parents are from. You can talk about this in the **ethnic origin/national identity** section. If you have a UK passport, you're a UK national. It's important to know that 'dual nationality' is **not the same** as 'dual heritage' or 'dual identity': being mixed-raced or having parents born in another country doesn't give you dual nationality unless you have a passport from that other country as well as your British one.
- **Residential category** - this can be a difficult one, but there's a help box provided for you to work it out. However if you're really confused, you should be able to ask a teacher.
- **Unique Learner Number** - this usually appears on your exam papers, and on the tab of paper used to show you where to sit in the exam hall. Some students don't have one - simply because their exam board or school doesn't use them - so don't worry if you don't. Again, if you're unsure whether you have one or not, a teacher should be able to help you out.
- **Nominated access?** This refers to students who need somebody else to act for them because they're physically or mentally incapable of filling out the form. If you're filling out the form yourself, just ignore it.
- **Disabilities?** Obviously, if you have disabilities, list them. Also, remember that 'disability' doesn't only mean being confined to a wheelchair or being blind or deaf. If you have dyslexia or dyspraxia, or have suffered from depression, then you can list these. And even if you don't have any kind of disability whatsoever, you still **have to** fill in the form - even if it's just to check 'None.'

Next comes the **Additional Information** section. This includes:

- **Ethnic origin/national identity.** The answers to these questions are self-defined. This means that you can fill in whatever you feel is appropriate for yourself. If you have British citizenship but were born in India, or both your parents are German and you were brought up speaking German, you might choose to enter 'Indian' or 'German.' You can also include a dual identity, such as 'Indian-British,' if you feel that one nationality is too restricting. It's also OK to check **'Prefer not to say'** in this section. This information isn't given to universities until after they've decided whether or not to offer you a place - it doesn't affect their decision at all. It's useful for UCAS and for the universities to monitor the diversity of their student bodies: for instance, if a university notices that it has very few

Afro-Caribbean pupils applying, it might consider what it needs to do to attract more people from that community.

- **Activities in preparation for higher education.** Include: Saturday university tasters, campus days, summer schools or academies, taster courses, booster courses, formal interview practice outside your school. Don't include: open days, revision sessions, extra help from teachers at your school, mock exams. You don't have to list everything you've done in this section, just two things. You may not have done anything besides studying for your classes and talking to your teachers, and that's fine. If that's the case, just leave this section blank. The information here is used to show your dedication to higher education.
- **Care, parental education and occupational background.** The 'occupational background' referred to here is **your parents'**, **not your own**. If both your parents work, enter the occupation of the person who earns the most. If neither of your parents work, enter the occupation that the one who *used* to earn the most *used* to have. But remember that these questions, like the 'ethnic origin/ national identity' question, are optional. Some universities only use them for statistical monitoring, like the 'ethnic origin' question, while others might use them to give more context to your application. This is designed to let them include more students, not to exclude them - you won't get rejected because your parents don't have graduate jobs, but if you seem nervous at interview, they might make allowances based on that fact. It could also be used 'against' you - for instance, if you're applying for a Law course with low-ish grades but a great personal statement, and your parents are lawyers, the admissions tutors might conclude that the statement could not be all your own work. In reality, this hardly ever happens; but if you're worried that it could affect you just leave this space blank.

When you've registered, you should receive a Welcome letter within a week or so. This will give your UCAS Track login details, allowing you to access the system from anywhere. Many students end up checking Track daily until they've heard back from all their choices - sometimes more often at high-stress stages.

It's a good idea to **register early**, to get it out of the way, so that when you've decided on your choices, you can just type them in to a page that already contains all your info. The closer it gets to the deadline date the more stressed out you'll be, and less likely to have time for fiddly things like filling in grades and school postcodes.

Case Study: Laurell, 18, says 'I don't know why I left it till the last minute to do my form - I think I was feeling superstitious about 'jinxing it' by actually writing my choices down! I put loads of thought into filling out a really great application for my Graphic Design degree, but registering did my head in with all the unexpected questions.'

But don't enter your choices until you're absolutely sure about them. After they're entered, you only have seven days to change your mind. Check and double-check that the institution and course code are correct. You'll only need to fill in the 'further details' section in a few cases, such as when you're taking a combined degree. You can find this out through checking the university prospectuses or e-mailing or calling the admissions department.

Some people don't realise till this stage that the course isn't taking place where they thought it would be, but on a different campus or site. If you realise this, it's worth having a look at the campus again before you go ahead with that choice. Some universities have campuses far away from each other which may affect your decision. For instance, if you chose Anglia Ruskin University because you wanted to be in the centre of Cambridge, you might well want to choose another uni if you find out that your course is actually taught in Chelmsford.

If you've read 'Chapter Two: Choosing The Subject That's Right For You' and 'Chapter Three: Choosing The University That's Right For You,' you shouldn't have any problem filling in the course choices!

The next section is 'Employment.' This refers to paid work, whether that's part-time or full-time. **Relevant** information about voluntary jobs or work experience can be included in your **personal statement**. The 'Employment' section is designed for mature students, who are likely to have a fuller work history. You can still fill this in if you're a sixth-former though. Don't fill in anything that isn't true - universities often contact your employers to request references or confirmation of what you did. But remember that it's never too late to gain some more experience for your personal statement. Right up until a few weeks before you have to send it off, you can look for short-term internship and work experience opportunities on www.Getting-in.com.

Personal Statement

The final part of the UCAS Track form is the one that people spend far more time composing than any other. Writing a personal statement, for some students, is a huge hurdle in between themselves and their goal of **getting in** to a university of their choice. You only have 47 lines, or 4000 characters (without spaces!) to use to convey how great you are, how much you love the subject, and why the universities should accept you - and the personal statement format can leave many students confused if they don't receive the proper guidance.

Case Study: Angel, 21, says, 'I left school after A-Levels to start a job with a big company doing admin in the human resources department. After a couple of years, the company told me that the only thing standing in the way of a promotion for me was my lack of a degree, which would prove that I was intelligent, give me lots of background knowledge and prove my commitment to HR. So I

applied for HR degrees at local universities and colleges through UCAS. I thought that a university would snap me up as I had good A-Levels, great references from my boss and my old form tutor from school, and I wrote loads about all my experience in HR on the 'Employment' section of the Track form. I wasn't sure what a 'personal statement' was, so I just wrote a quick paragraph about my background and my past experience. I didn't get into any of my offers and I was really upset, but when I asked my form tutor she was shocked that I hadn't done a proper personal statement. Now she's going to help me write a proper statement and I'm hoping to get into a good university for my degree next year, but I feel really silly for not asking for help when I first applied.'

Because most universities don't interview candidates any more, the personal statement is often the **only information** that the admissions tutors have about you besides your grades, which are very impersonal and general. Most people applying to a certain course will have very similar predicted grades, because they'll usually be close to the stated entrance requirements. So the personal statement and reference can be the only differentiating factors between several candidates. You can ask your teacher to include certain things on your reference, but you can't really control what goes on it. However, you **can** control what's on your personal statement.

The first step towards having a complete personal statement is always to write a **draft version**. In this version, don't worry about it being too long or too short, containing irrelevant information or unchecked facts, or being carefully structured - it's **not the one you will hand in**.

The process of writing a draft can help you work out the main points that you want to put across in your statement, and generally get you thinking about your own motivations and inspirations.

After you've written it, you can seek help from:

- **Your teachers.** Unless your teachers aren't very good at their jobs, they will be the best resource for helping you with your personal statement, as they're used to processing hundreds of them and have seen from experience the kinds of personal statements that get people **into** university; and those that don't. However, there are restrictions in the advice you can get from teachers. Because they have so many students to deal with, they're unlikely to be willing to read more than one draft of a personal statement. Also, they're bound by quite restrictive rules as to the **amount of help they can give**. They won't offer detailed suggestions or point out specific mistakes, but only give general advice: it's not helpful to try and push them on this, since if they're found to be over-stepping the mark with the amount of help they give to personal statement writers they risk losing their jobs. Get as much advice from your teacher as s/he can give you, and then move on to...
- **Your parents.** To a certain extent, this depends on your parents' own academic history. It's a sad but true fact that candidates whose parents have both been to top-tier universities

have a significant advantage over candidates whose families have no history of higher education - that's why schemes like the Cambridge Special Access Scheme were set up. But if your parents are used to reading texts - even if that's only simple business letters - they will be able to tell you how well your personal statement **flows**, and whether or not they can follow the train of your thought. Most parents will also have written a job application letter at some point in their lives, and although a personal statement has many important differences to a cover letter, an enthusiastic and convincing tone is required for both of them: your parents may well give you tips on how well that comes across.

- **Outside organisations.** The huge importance of the personal statement is the reason why websites like **Getting In** exist, which will offer tailored help for your personal statement writing. If you do use the services of any organisation outside your school though, it's important to check with them that what goes on your personal statement is **unique** and **tailored to you**. UCAS uses sophisticated, computerised plagiarism detection software to identify duplicate personal statements, which can be downloaded and copy-pasted into the UCAS Track form. The right kind of personal statement helps you to show your own personality, strengths and achievements - and admissions tutors will be able to tell a duplicate. **Getting-In** uses unique personal statement advisors who will be able to balance the help you need with the individuality your statement needs to show.

Unlike Angel in the Case Study above, you should start drafting your personal statement long before you have to send off your UCAS application. It will probably take several drafts to make a truly great statement. For essay-based subjects such as English, History, Politics or Classics, the **style and structure** of your personal statement is just as important as the **achievements and motivations** that you list in it. Treat the statement like an essay, where your main point is that **you should study your subject**.

If the personal statement Angel described writing had been a story in a newspaper, the headline would have been '*An Introduction to Angel*'. This didn't get her a place, because it wasn't relevant to her subject. Admissions tutors don't really care about how 'good' in an abstract sense a particular student is: they want to hear that the student will do well in their course. The headline for Angel's personal statement *should* have been '*Why Angel and Social Work are made for each other*'.

An old tip for writing job application cover letters is that the cover letter should read like a **love letter** to the company. A personal statement is very different from a cover letter, but this bit of advice is still good. Personal statements aren't love letters to particular universities - as you apply to five different universities with one letter - but they should be love letters to the subject!

This means both proving how much you *love* the subject, and how perfect *you* are for it. So you need to point out what you like about the subject in a creative, original and intelligent way. And you need to show which great qualities you have that make you good for the subject. But the best way to integrate these is to demonstrate your great qualities **in the way that you write about the subject.**

In summary, a personal statement should explain:

- **What you enjoy about studying the subject**
- **Why the subject is important and relevant**
- **Which skills, insights or ways of thinking make you a good student of the subject**

You can demonstrate the third point by talking about the first two in a convincing and engaging way.

This might mean including obscure facts about the subject or insights about extra-curricular books you've read, but these should all **support the main point** of your statement: that your subject is great. It's no use just spitting out a fact, quote or reference to a book that doesn't really connect to the rest of what you're saying. That will just sound as if you're showing off, rather than sounding truly intelligent. Here are some examples of references to extra-curricular reading which are used to support a main point:

- 'As E.H. Carr repeatedly points out, there can be no separation between history and historian, so I decided to study what it means to be British.'
- 'I enjoy the fact that mathematical problems usually have a clear-cut answer (1 plus 1 will always be equal to 2), but there is often a complex explanation as to why (Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell took 379 pages to prove that $1+1=2$ in *Principia Mathematica*).'
- 'Through reading *The Undercover Economist* by T. Harford and 'The Armchair Economist' by S. Landsburg, I am beginning to discover how economics relates to everyday decisions, enabling me to more fully develop my reasoning skills.'

These examples are **good** because they support the things that the person is trying to say about **why they like the subject** and **why they think the subject is important**. Remember, a professor who's reading your application will have dedicated his or her life to the subject: they want to hear about how important that subject is! If you're feeling light on your reading, it's not too late to pick some interesting volumes up for a bargain using **Getting-In's** buy-and-sell app.

Here are some examples of incorporating outside reading and extra-curricular knowledge that *aren't* so good:

- 'I have read Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* and Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time*.'
- 'As China has a population of over a billion people, it's a fascinating place to study as a geographer.'
- "Religion is the opiate of the masses," said Karl Marx. I am interested in the function of religion in politics.'

These examples aren't likely to win the applicant a place at a good university, even though they display evidence of knowledge and an extra-curricular interest in the subject. This is because they don't serve any of the functions in the checklist above.

Although they refer to areas of interest, they don't demonstrate what the student **enjoys about the subjects**. They also don't demonstrate any interesting **skills or insights**. The contents of the science books aren't referred to, it isn't explained why large populations are fascinating, and the last example demonstrates the worst way to use a quote: attaching it to a comment about the student without using it to illuminate what the student thinks. The student hasn't said whether s/he agrees or disagrees with Marx, or what that quote means to him or her. Many people use clever-sounding quotes instead of writing their own arguments in their personal statements, but admissions tutors will ignore these unless the student is using the quote in a creative way.

Remember, as a sixth-former it's almost impossible to actually tell a professional academic anything new. The Marx quote might sound clever to you, but an admissions tutor will have read it hundreds of times! The only way to impress an academic is to show **an ability to grapple with ideas**. Many personal statement advisors will tell you **not to include quotes** at all - if a quote seems really important to you, try to say it again using your own words. Quotes *can* be helpful, but most of the time they're used as a rather lazy way to sound impressive! The same applies to the kind of words you had to look up in a dictionary: words like 'hegemonic,' 'structuralist' or 'antidisestablishmentarianism' (!) sound phenomenal to you, but admissions tutors spend all day with words like these and won't find them impressive.

Last but not least - everyone *knows* you shouldn't refer to extra-curricular learning that you haven't actually done, but many people also think that 'everyone does it.' This is a tactic that will probably backfire, though you might not realise it at the time. As I've said, reeling off a list of reading isn't impressive unless you make connections between it and your own ideas, and you won't be able to do that if you haven't read the material! And if you're applying to a university which does interviews, it could **backfire horribly**.

Case Study: Shane, 20, says, 'I thought I had a really good chance of getting into Durham for Theology, as my grades were great and I spent ages on my personal statement. My teacher said I should put in some references to extra-curricular reading, but though I've read the Bible and Koran, I hadn't really read any critical theology books that weren't on my course. I saw a new book called The Reason for God by Timothy Keller on my teacher's desk so I put down that I'd read that, thinking the admissions tutors probably wouldn't know too much about it as it was new. But when I went up for my interview, it turned out that the professor interviewing me was writing an academic paper about Keller! He asked me which part of the book I'd most enjoyed and I had no idea what to say... I just turned bright red. Unsurprisingly, I didn't get an offer...'

Reeling off lists of books you've read with no contextualising information shows that you don't know how to **structure an argument in a convincing and engaging way** - and whatever subject you do, if you're doing it at degree level then this skill will be important.

One of the most common confusions around personal statements is the extent of extra-curricular activities that should be included. Lots of advice is very vague or contradictory about this. The reason for this is that, although a lot of advisors want to give a 'one size fits all' answer, it does depend on which courses you're applying to.

Most of the more 'traditional' universities and more academic courses want a personal statement to be almost all about your experience of the subject and the reasons that you want to study it. However, many people also include information about:

- **Sports and hobbies**
- **Volunteering and charity/ community work**
- **Work experience and career aspirations**

Generally speaking, the more academic the course and university are - the more well-known the university is for research, and the less the course has to do with the 'working world' - the less it should refer to these things. This may seem peculiar, but the truth is that admissions tutors for the most academic subjects are ultimately hoping you might stay on as a postgraduate student. This doesn't mean that you have to convince them that that's exactly what you want - but it does mean they will want you to **love studying the subject for its own sake**. So if you apply to Cambridge for Maths and write in your personal statement that you ultimately aim to get into banking, the admissions tutors won't be impressed by your ambition and focus: they'll want you to choose Maths simply because you love it.

On the other end of the spectrum, vocational courses such as Business Studies, Sports Management or Publishing will want to know that your work experience, career aspirations and extra-curricular

activities reflect the importance of the subject to your life and future plans. What they're looking for is somebody who won't drop out, but will go on to a **successful career** in the field in which they did their degree and tell other people that they trained at that university. So you'll have to use extra-curricular experiences as evidence that you're really sure this is what you want to do in life.

Of course, most applicants will fall somewhere in between these two extremes. A good rule for most personal statements is that the first three or four paragraphs should **focus on the subject**, including any extra-curricular reading or trips. The next paragraph can give details of hobbies, achievements, extra-curricular activities and volunteering or work experience that relate to the subject you're applying for, while the last paragraph can include any particularly impressive non-related achievements. As a rule, experience unrelated to the subject - such as a Saturday job, musical instrument talent or place on a sports team - should only be mentioned if it's very impressive (sports competition at a national level, professional music performance or literary publication, *etc*).

If you're not careful about searches for guidance on the internet, you'll end up finding advice which tells you to stress being 'well-rounded.' This is a quality that's prized very highly in the American university application system, so lots of web advice will tell you to follow it. However, the academic culture in the UK is different, and **passion for the subject** will trump 'well-rounded' any time! So make sure that you use UK-based advice sites such as www.Getting-in.com instead, to get really relevant and up-to-date advice.

This doesn't mean that you can't write *anything* about things not related to your subject. It can be interesting and give your statement some colour when you include extras about yourself. But you should try to show that they're related to your subject.

For instance:

- 'The recent 'Soul in the City' project, a pan-London youth and community initiative encompassing over 700 partnerships, enabled me to get a human perspective on my geographical case studies of urban poverty.'
- 'Three months in Florence doing an Art History course on Renaissance art enabled me to encounter theological questions from a different perspective.'
- 'My interest in psychology was first sparked by my job working in the children's department of a shoe shop. The way various children reacted differently to the same experiences intrigued me.'

This can be tricky, but if you can pull it up you'll have greatly upped your chances of **getting in!**

A few more quick tips:

- **Always leave a line between paragraphs.** When you're struggling to fit everything into the measly 4000 characters allowed by UCAS, it's easy to run out of space, and lots of people conclude that leaving a line between paragraphs is a waste. They think that the admissions tutors will be able to reformat the statement if they want to. But the truth is that the tutors are **swamped with hundreds of entries** every year. They often work unpaid overtime around the admissions period, and will probably already be very stressed when they're sent the printed-out statements - they won't have time to ask for a re-formatted copy, and won't appreciate a lack of paragraph breaks making it harder to read.
- **Avoid humour.** Because prospective students are so often told that they have to 'catch admissions tutors' attention,' they sometimes think that humour will be a good way to make the tutor smile and remember them. This might be true if the tutor has exactly the same sense of humour as you do - but in all likelihood, he or she probably won't. A joke or pun also uses up valuable space!
- **Read newspaper articles to see how they capture attention.** Journalists are experts at making someone read on after the first couple of sentences - they do this by using punchy openings. Sometimes these are quirky or strange-sounding; sometimes they follow the formula '**who what where when why?**' - a journalistic standard which you can easily adapt. For instance, 'Because I believe that learning about the past is the best way we can learn about the present, the study of history has fascinated me ever since I used my GCSE study of the Cold War to enhance my knowledge of the dynamic behind the conflict in Afghanistan.'
- **Don't use self-help speak to talk about your aspirations.** Although admissions tutors want people who feel they will benefit from the course, they don't want you to be more focused on your personal growth than your intellectual development. Saying things like 'the course will be the next step in my path towards discovery,' sounds vague as well as un-academic.
- **Check word count again and again.** The Word Count feature doesn't work in the UCAS 'Apply' box, so make sure that your statement is absolutely perfect in Word before you cut and paste it into Track. **Make sure** that you have the option 'included spaces' ticked in the options for character count, and if you decide to change anything - even if it's only a few words - once it's in the 'Apply' box, cut and paste it back into Word to do a final character check before you hit 'Send.'
- **Don't tell academics things they already know.** The professional academic researcher reading your personal statement knows his or her subject inside out. What s/he doesn't know about is **you**.

There are a lot of great resources on the web for those writing personal statements. **Getting-In** offers a personal connection with high-achieving recent graduates from top universities, who can

work with a sixth-former on his or her personal statement in order to perfect it. If you're really having trouble with the statement, you can tell your advisor about the key points you want to get across - your subjects and what you enjoyed about them, your future career hopes and extra-curricular activities - and they will write them up into well-structured and engaging prose for the admissions tutors to read.

However, if you do decide to turn to online resources, or the help of any organisation outside your school or college, for help with your personal statement, there's one thing you should be very careful about. **Getting-In**, along with other reputable personal statement assistance organisations, is very careful to make sure that each personal statement is **unique** and is **tailored to each student**. However, there are also many organisations which provide standardised personal statements to students. This means that they can respond to requests very quickly, and the personal statements may be of very high quality, but don't be fooled. If your personal statement isn't specific to you, it won't convince admissions tutors - and may fail to get past **UCAS' plagiarism detection software**, which is designed to weed out duplicates issued by these companies.

So always go for an organisation like **Getting-In**, which provides personal statements that are **specific to you**.

Reference

Your reference is written by a teacher - usually the teacher of the subject to which you're applying, if you're already doing that subject at A-Level. If you're not, then your subject teacher for the subject closest to it will probably write your reference. You're not involved in writing the reference at any stage, and won't get to see it before the teacher sends it off to UCAS.

UCAS references **aren't like job references**, which are just notes confirming the time that you worked there and what your duties were. The level of detail involved depends on the teacher, but he or she is free to discuss your **personality, learning style, motivation, class participation** and anything else relevant. They won't give a really negative reference, but could do damage by using 'coded' phrases to imply your flaws. For instance, writing 'He is capable of hard work,' instead of the more simple 'He works hard,' will be read by admissions staff as 'He is good at his work, but too lazy to really exert himself.'

Case Study: Callum, 19, says, I come from a pretty nationalist part of Scotland, and my teachers wanted me to apply to Edinburgh or St Andrews - but I had my heart set on living in the UK capital, and I applied to LSE instead. I got a place, and when I met my tutor for the first time, he laughed when he remembered my name. He said that my reference had been awful, but because

I'd got four As at AS-Level, he'd decided I must be very independent and strong-willed for my teachers to dislike me so much, and LSE like original thinkers!

However, teachers want their student to go to good universities - it reflects well on their teaching! - and will have to be very disappointed in you to write anything negative.

It's far more common for your referee to use this space to **explain away problems** which may exist in your application. They can use the reference note to give background information about your school and your education there - for example, if you're applying for Music Technology but have never studied it before, your teacher could explain that that's because it wasn't offered at your school. And if your AS grades are significantly lower than your predicted A grades, your teacher can explain the reasoning behind that - perhaps you had a teacher leave halfway through the year, or were struggling with family or personal problems. If people from your school typically get very low grades, or rarely go on to university, your teacher might point this out to show how impressive your academic drive is in this context. **Don't** include things about your personal circumstances or any difficulties you've had in your education on your personal statement, which should be completely positive and mostly about the subject you're applying for - **have a chat** with your teacher and ask him or her to include them on your reference.

You can also ask your teacher to include details of extra-curricular activity unrelated to your subject on your reference, in order to save space on your personal statement. If you were Head Girl, football goalkeeper, or Duke of Edinburgh co-ordinator, this can be included here.

Your teacher won't appreciate being chased down to add something new to your reference whenever you think of it - and s/he isn't *obliged* to say anything. If you remind your teacher of a different achievement every week, you're running the risk that s/he might decide not to include them and to attach a negative comment about your organisational skills. Instead, **impress** your reference by sitting down for a think as soon as you find out who s/he will be, to make a list of information that supports your application but doesn't seem appropriate for your personal statement. Then, catch the teacher quietly before or after a class and ask about references - then asking if s/he would think it appropriate to include the things you've thought of. Remember that s/he is almost certainly more of an expert than you on the admissions process, and will be able to know whether the information is relevant.

If you're applying to Oxford or Cambridge, let your reference know as soon as possible, and don't be afraid to remind them if it's close to the deadline and they still haven't uploaded your reference to UCAS. If your school sends a lot of people to these universities regularly, they'll be aware of the earlier deadline, but if an Oxbridge applicant is rare in the school then teachers may need some prompting, as they'll be used to running on a January deadline for references.

Of course, many - perhaps most - prospective university students don't have anything they need to put on their references. If your schooling and home life have both been normal and reasonably happy, and you've achieved the AS grades that were expected, then you simply don't have to worry about the reference.

Concentrate on writing the best possible **personal statement** you can!

Processing Your Application

Many advice sources say that you should take as much time as possible making your application to make sure that all your choices and personal statement are perfect. They say that it **doesn't matter** if you end up sending your application close to the deadline, because universities consider all applications equally.

This is the **official** way that universities are supposed to operate, and say they - even though many people receive their offers before the deadline for applications is passed.

But if *you* were an admissions tutor, what would *you* be more excited by - the first week or two of opening new applications and discovering new prospective students, or the slog through the stragglers at the end?

University admissions tutors are human too, and they get bored, stressed out or overwhelmed just like the rest of us! By the time the 15th January deadline draws near, they'll already have either made offers or have several candidates in mind to make offers to, so the people who apply right on the deadline are competing in the tutors' minds with people who they already want. Almost all courses give more students offers than there are spaces on the course, so that if several people don't get the grades the course isn't left half-empty. This means that the tutors might start the admissions process feeling that they need to sign people up in order to avoid a sparse classroom! But they also don't want the courses they teach to be too crowded, as that isn't good for learning - so when they already have a pile of offers made, they might subconsciously feel that there isn't much room left on the course.

And for admissions tutors, there are very real penalties for being oversubscribed. HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) actually **charges** universities £3,700 for every student admitted who takes numbers above the originally stated quota for the course! The cut in funding for student places by the government in 2010 was the first move designed to make university participation harder, and follows decades of universities being told to include as many people as possible on their courses. So, late applications might already be coming to a full house: you'll have

to be a truly amazing candidate for universities to take you knowing that they'll be fined for doing so.

It's also worth considering that applying at the last minute may look like you're not sure about your subject or about the university, as you took so long to make your final decision. And as I've said, admissions tutors value **enthusiasm** probably more than anything else, except grades!

This means that applying as early as possible will give you a clear advantage.

So although it's not a good idea to rush to make your choices, leaving them until the last moment isn't great either. The timetable in **Inset Six** shows how you should start considering your options by visiting open days and starting to think critically about the next few years during the summer of your AS year, before the results even come out.

Some universities will send you a letter or e-mail to acknowledge receipt of your application, but some won't. There's no standardised system - universities are independently-run organisations. So if you haven't got a letter acknowledging receipt, don't worry. If UCAS says your application's been submitted, **then it has**.

UCAS exists to present all of each candidate's information to admissions tutors **in the same, simple way**. However, different unis take different lengths of time to make their decisions. With the exception of Oxford and Cambridge, which will get back to all applicants before December as that's when they interview, there's no way of predicting how long each university will take to respond to your application. It makes no difference whether the university is prestigious or the course is competitive: they'll respond **when they make a decision**, and this depends on how much time they have. Something as trivial as a staff leaving do could be the reason you're sitting at home worrying because your friends have had their offers already and you haven't heard anything!

Although it's true that universities tend to make offers to very good candidates first - because they know, even without weighing them up against other applicants, that they want these candidates - not having heard back from a university when all your friends have doesn't mean you're a bad candidate. The truth is that it probably means you're not a *truly exceptional* candidate - but very few people are.

If you're not one of these candidates, universities will spend some time weighing up your application against the others they've received. They do this using the materials UCAS has provided: your predicted and actual grades, personal statement, and reference. Plus, if you've taken an extra exam like the BMAT or UKCAT, they'll have those results too. And if the course has

asked for a sample of written or portfolio work, the admissions tutors will be looking at that as well.

Cambridge also asks you to complete a SAQ (**Supplementary Application Questionnaire**) after you've applied, usually by the 22nd October. This isn't a difficult questionnaire, and is used to ensure 'consistent information about applicants.' It doesn't appear automatically on the UCAS Track form - Cambridge will send a secure link to your e-mail address when their system receives your UCAS application.

The SAQ includes a photograph of you, so that they know what you look like at your interview - some applicants have been known to send substitutes masquerading as them to interview instead - and information like your UMS scores and GCSE module grades. It isn't intellectually challenging and **isn't a test**, but can be time-consuming, so set aside at least one full evening for it (ideally not the 19th October!). Most of the SAQ is straightforward and self-explanatory, but the section where you talk about the Topics you've studied can confuse some people. Cambridge asks for these so that the interviewers can ask you about areas of your subject that you've studied, rather than asking a question that you won't be able to answer simply because you haven't been taught about it. Because they're for use in the interview, you should only list topics you've **already** studied. You can get a guide as to what your topics were from your Module titles, but they don't have to be exactly the same - this isn't a formal, standardised part of the application, like your grades, but is just a quick guide for interviewers.

More importantly, the SAQ includes a space to provide an **Additional Personal Statement**, where you can explain what you like in particular about the university and the course. It's best to focus on the course, as Cambridge would rather gain a reputation for great courses than be told how much of a boost for your career or your Nan's Christmas round robin a place would be! The **Alternative Personal Statement** often panics applicants who've left their UCAS submissions till the last moment on the 14th, and find out that they now only have 5 days to write a whole new part of their application. But there's no need to worry about it. This isn't as important as the main UCAS personal statement - it's optional, much shorter at 1200 characters maximum, and Cambridge explicitly states that applicants won't be disadvantaged if they leave a blank space here.

However, it's worth putting *something* here, and getting your teacher to read it over. After all, there must be a reason why you like **that course** in particular - even if your reason for liking Oxbridge is mainly the prestige, there's still a reason you chose the Cambridge course over Oxford's equivalent. Remember when you were comparing the courses on **Getting-In's** online information resource, and what stood out for you about the course you're applying for. Just make sure that you don't let yourself down here by writing with poor style, structure, grammar, syntax or punctuation.

Some resources which offer personal statement help - including **Getting-In** - can also help you out with Cambridge's Alternative Personal Statement.

You can also include information about your career plans (if any!) on the SAQ, and 'any other information.'

When considering your application, the University of Oxford, and some courses (mainly medical degrees and some Law and Maths degrees) will also have the results of the additional tests you've sat when they consider your application. There's a full guide supplied for those taking these tests in '**Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work.**'

Once the admissions tutors have all the information in front of them, the first thing they'll do is '**weed out**' those candidates whom they definitely don't want to offer a place. This will be students who aren't taking enough A-Levels in the 'recommended' subjects, who have done silly things like forgetting to attach their personal statements, and whose predicted grades are well below the stated requirements for the course. As I've explained above, an explanation of low grades within your reference or, if you're applying to Cambridge, the Special Access Scheme paperwork, will be taken into account - but if you're simply applying for an AAA requirement course, you're predicted CCC and there's no information in your UCAS application to explain the disparity, oversubscribed admissions tutors probably won't consider you.

Admissions tutors at most universities claim to measure by 'academic potential' rather than 'academic achievement'; meaning that they analyse the personal statement and reference as well as predicted grades, instead of just looking at a candidate's AS-Level and GCSE results. However, with so many students applying for fewer places there's so much competition that low grades will have to be compensated for with a truly brilliant **personal statement**. Admissions tutors have admitted that with the cuts in funding for student places and HEFCE fines, they've had to concentrate more on weeding out applicants than scanning for signs of 'potential.'

The people deciding on the admissions vary from university to university. However, people within the department of the course for which you're applying will always be the ones making the decisions. Typically, the central university management will work with the department heads to decide on rough quotas before any applications are received. Then when the applications start to come in from late September or October, the people responsible for admissions in each department know roughly how many students they are looking for - although there is some flexibility built into this, to ensure that if an unexpected number of great students apply one year, they won't just be turned away.

Two or more people are always involved in the admissions process, in order to try to eliminate bias - so that one person's judgement won't be the only thing that counts.

There was a furore in 2008 when a Cambridge University admissions tutor wrote in the Emmanuel College magazine that he uses **Facebook** to get additional information about applicants. Dr Richard Barnes was criticised in the press for the admission. However, nobody except other university admissions tutors knows how common using social media to check up on students really is. It's now common knowledge that up to half of employers check up on applicants for jobs through their Facebook profiles or public Tweets. You're unlikely to be turned away because of a picture of you drinking, or a sexy message on your boyfriend's wall, but offensive, racist or violent comments might make a pretty bad impression. You *could* join lots of fan groups for your favourite uni and start posting quadratic equation solutions as your status updates, but the best way to make sure you're not disadvantaged by social media to **update your privacy preferences** before applying to uni! Only your friends should be able to see your profile, wall and photos.

The admissions tutors usually have two decisions: whether or not to admit each person, and also what the required grades to meet the offer should be. If they *really* like an application, they might make an 'unconditional' offer, meaning that no matter what grades the student gets, they will be guaranteed a place.

Some courses and universities do interviews, meaning that there's another round to be got through in your journey towards higher education. If you apply to one of these courses or universities, you will receive either a definite rejection, or an invitation to interview. The interview stage is discussed in the next chapter, '**Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work.**'

In Oxford and Cambridge, it's the **colleges** that go through admissions, which makes the process a little more personal as they'll definitely be teaching the people they admit one-on-one. They have another option in their decision making process as well: they can decide to reject an application, and to make a conditional or an unconditional offer, like admissions staff at other universities - but they can also decide to 'pool' students. (The point of the 'pooling' system is explained on page 65, in the chapter '**Choosing The University That's Right For You.**') If you're pooled, you might be accepted by the college which picks you from the pool straight away, if the college which interviewed you gives a strong enough recommendation. In other cases, the college which is considering taking you from the pool might ask you back for another interview, and then send you a letter telling you the outcome a little while later.

Whatever way the system works, by the end of March you should have all of your answers from the universities (unless you're applying for an art and design course, or have applied late).

Some universities send postal letters or e-mails to each applicant, while others just rely on the UCAS system, updating it with their decisions. Because of this - and because even some universities which send letters don't get them sent off before the UCAS details are updated online - it's worth checking UCAS regularly. Oxford and Cambridge almost always make sure that the letter reaches you before the Track update, but with other universities it's a bit of a race to see whether UCAS or the Royal Mail is more efficient!

Receiving an envelope through the post emblazoned with the crest of your favourite university can make you feel like Harry Potter when his first mysterious Hogwarts letter came through the door. You're full of anticipation, wondering whether it'll be a 'yes' or a 'no' when you unfold the rustling paper...

This happens for some candidates who receive letters about offers. Just in case, it's best not to rip through the post while you're walking to school, as people sometimes react emotionally to offers or (even more so) to rejections. This is why Oxford and Cambridge make sure that letters come first, as you're less likely to open a letter at school or in front of friends than you are to check Track or read an e-mail.

UCAS updates are a bit less dramatic. But seeing an 'Offer' indication next to your dream course can be one of the best feelings in the world.

When you have an offer made through UCAS, you have until the 9th of May to accept it. Most people make a decision on their offers long before that deadline - but it *is* worth waiting for all of your answers to come through before you make a definite decision. No matter how prestigious the university, or oversubscribed the course, they aren't allowed to withdraw offers once they've been made because you've taken your time saying 'yes.' Even if you get an offer from the uni that was top of your list, waiting for all the answers to come through will give you valuable thinking and breathing time.

Offers are either conditional or unconditional - C or U in the UCAS code. You can accept up to two offers, but you don't *have* to accept any of them. If you change your mind about your choices when universities have already made offers, you can decline all of them and still keep your UCAS profile open, to apply for new courses through UCAS Extra or Clearing.

If you receive more than one offer, the usual procedure is to accept one offer as 'firm' (F in the UCAS code) and a second as 'insurance' (I). You can also only accept one offer, but you can't accept more than two.

The 'firm' offer is your first choice, and the one that you will automatically get into if you get the right results in August. The 'insurance' choice is usually a lower offer: you make this choice so that if you slip a grade when you get your results, you won't be left without a place anywhere.

Case Study: Cara, 18, says, 'What I really wanted to do was Chemical Engineering at Nottingham, but they rejected me so I accepted a BBB offer from Manchester Metropolitan. But as I was really struggling with my Maths A-Level, I also accepted Bangor's BCC offer as my 'insurance.' I'm glad that I did - the Maths exam turned out to be a nightmare, with a lot of questions about my weakest point (calculus). I got a low C in Maths, which still got me into Bangor but would never have worked for Manchester Met. It's been a bit of a rollercoaster ride through all the different unis and I was quite upset when I didn't get into Manchester, but now I'm at Bangor I'm having loads of fun! I really wanted to leave my small home town and get out into uni, so this is a lot better than staying on another year for re-sits or fighting to find a place in Clearing.'

Many unis will deliberately make low offers to great candidates in order to be listed as the insurance offer, so that if a student slips up for some reason during his or her A-Levels, s/he will join that uni. For instance, UCL might make an AAA offer to a student who has only just made the cut, but make AAB offers to students who they suspect will be applying to Oxford or Cambridge.

Universities don't know which other universities you've applied for, or whether they're your favourite choice, when they're processing your applications - they're not allowed to have this information in case they reject students who are good enough to go there just because they're not the students' first choice. However, in some cases they can work out that they might not be a first choice. This is typically because the student has better grades predicted than the course requires: if you're predicted AAA but are applying to a course with a typical BBB or ABB offer, the admissions tutors will probably work out that they're your insurance offer. Some universities don't like this, because they want to be sure that the students who they make offers to will turn up on the course. Otherwise, they end up with not enough students on the course when results day comes around, and have to get new students through Clearing, which is stressful and chaotic for universities as well as for students.

This is why, although selecting one or two slightly less demanding universities is a good thing, you shouldn't apply to universities that offer much lower entry requirements than your predicted grades simply because they'll be 'easy to get into.' Using these unis as 'safe' choices may well backfire if they reject you due to their doubt that you'll actually turn up on their course.

Universities are most likely to guess correctly that you're applying to Oxford or Cambridge because you'll be sending off an application very early, in time for the 15th October deadline; while most students don't complete applications till November or December at the earliest. The exception to

this rule is medical students, who have to apply to all their choices by the 15th October. Early applications *could* just be a sign of a very keen student, but universities like UCL, Imperial, Bristol and Durham, which are often chosen by students also applying to Oxbridge, will make a pretty shrewd guess that that's what's going on. Some universities are more receptive to this than others. Imperial, LSE, Durham and the Scottish universities have reputations for rejecting good candidates who they think are likely to put Oxford or Cambridge first. This is because they're very keen to be seen as *preferable* to Oxford or Cambridge, and want students who believe that they are the best.

This **doesn't mean you shouldn't apply** to these unis if you're also an Oxbridge candidate: just that you might do well to apply to at least one other uni you'd be happy to go to - and that you shouldn't take it too personally if they reject you.

Universities might also reject you, even though you're a good candidate, if there are other signs on your personal statement that their course might not be your main interest. This often happens if you're applying for some slightly different course subjects. For instance, if you're applying for some English and some English and Journalism courses - as in the example in '**Chapter Two: Choosing The Subject That's Right For You,**' - the admissions tutors for the pure English courses might realise that they're not your first choice if you talk too much about your love of journalism or the media, even if you do connect it back to English.

There are all sorts of factors involved in universities' decisions, some of which you can't control - like how many applicants to the course the university has in your year - and if you get rejected it's never a good idea to wallow. Universities *may* give a reason for not accepting you if you call and ask them, but they're under no obligation to. Just start focussing on a university that *did* accept you, or on researching institutions for Extra or Clearing. This is the point at which many sixth-form leavers find **Getting-In's** course and university guide invaluable, as it gives them a quick way to get an overview about courses they may not have previously researched very thoroughly.

Offers sometimes need a little decoding.

Some of them stipulate which subject the grades must be in. For instance, a BBC offer to study Engineering at Canterbury might come with the added detail that one of the Bs must be in Maths. Universities won't stipulate a grade in a subject you're not taking, but they will look at your list of subjects to decide which is most essential. Others may specify that a certain subject *doesn't* count as a grade achieved as part of the offer: for instance, they might give a BBC offer, but specify that your General Studies is the only subject that can be a C.

Others use UMS points or UCAS tariff points to make their offers. UMS points standardise grades across different qualifications and subjects, while UCAS Tariff points are used to compare different

qualifications. There's more information about UMS points and how they are used to give flexible offers below. UCAS Tariff points are less frequently referred to, but they can help you to get an idea of how different sixth-form qualifications compare. You can see a full, official list of the different UCAS Tariff points awarded to each different type of qualification at http://www.ucas.com/students/ucas_tariff/tariffables, and can use this to get an idea of how discussions of A-Levels within this book relate to your qualifications.

When you've made decisions about all your offers, your Track form will typically have D for 'declined' next to three of the universities, FU or FC next to one, and IU or IC next to another. For instance, as in Sumitha's Track form below:

<i>Durham</i>	Unsuccessful	
<i>Bristol</i>	FC	AAA
<i>Leeds</i>	D	
<i>Reading</i>	D	
<i>Nottingham</i>	IC	ABB

This display would show that Sumitha has been rejected from Durham and has declined offers from Leeds and Reading. She wants to go to Bristol if her A-Levels turn out OK, and if she gets one or two Bs she will go to Nottingham instead.

If you've heard back from your favourite universities and are tired of waiting to hear back from universities that you were only planning to use as back-up, you can withdraw your applications from these unis in order to give UCAS your final decision choices.

Once you've made your decisions, it's very hard to change them. It's unheard of for universities that you've declined to agree to reconsider you if you decide you want to go there after all, unless you wait and apply again through Clearing. However, the competitive courses to which Sumitha applied are unlikely to have places available in Clearing.

Sometimes, though, it's possible to switch around your Firm and Insurance choices. If you decide you want to do this before your A-Level results come out, the proper procedure is to call the Insurance choice (in Sumitha's case, Nottingham) first and ask nicely if they'd consider admitting if you if you re-label them as your first choice. Then, you call the Firm choice and ask them to release you. They don't *have* to do this - by naming Bristol as her first choice Sumitha has essentially signed a contract with them - but in most cases they will, as they don't want students who are going to drop out or do badly because they're unhappy. After calling both the universities, you call UCAS and tell them that you want to switch. Both universities must also contact UCAS to confirm that they're OK with that.

You **can't** switch around your Firm and Insurance choices after your results come out. The implied contract goes into effect from the date your results are published. In the same way that a university which has made you an offer you've met can't just decide not to admit you, you have to attend the institution you've said yes to, not an alternative - or at least pay the first instalment of student fees. Dropping out of uni can be **expensive**, even if you do it before you've actually got there.

You are allowed to decide against doing a course you've signed up to without being penalised if you decide you want to work, travel, or wait to apply again next year - the problem arises when you ask a university which has accepted you to put you back into the UCAS 'pool' in that same year.

This also applies to a decision to drop out of your Insurance choice on results day - you'll have to beg the uni to 'release' you without charging. For this reason, it isn't a good idea to name an Insurance choice just to fill in the space, if it's an institution you wouldn't actually want to attend. The Insurance choice is completely optional.

If you have an unconditional offer from a university you want to go to, there's no reason to keep another university on as your Insurance choice. However, you **don't have to** accept an unconditional offer as your first choice.

Case Study: Jared, 18, says, 'When my UCAS answers for the Primary Education courses I'd applied for came back, Oxford Brookes had said that they wanted me no matter what grades I got, by giving me an unconditional offer. I really want to work with kids but I'm not naturally very academic, and was worried about my grades, so it was a relief to hear that my place was unconditional. But... I really wanted to study in my home town, Birmingham, where my family and girlfriend live, so when I also received a BBB offer from there I decided to see if I could make it. I listed Birmingham as my Firm choice - although that sounded funny, as it was definitely the less secure choice! - and Oxford Brookes as my Insurance. Knowing that I had a university place no matter what helped me to relax while concentrating on my revision. I'm happy to say that I made Birmingham's BBB offer, and I start my course next month!'

Some people are uncertain as to which grades will be accepted by their universities, even after they've received their offers. Jared's BBB in the Case Study above is pretty easy to interpret if he *does* get the exact BBB grade distribution - but getting ABC could lead to confusion. Would Birmingham have taken him?

The answer depends on the university.

Some universities give UMS requirements along with the more traditional grade requirements. The UMS requirement will be for a number of points equivalent to the grade requirements. If your offer comes with UMS marks as well as grades, then you'll get in **either** if you get your grade offer **or** if you get your UMS offer. So you can make up for a grade drop in one subject by getting unexpectedly high grades in another one.

UMS marks may also serve at some of the top universities - think Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, LSE - as an **extra** requirement on top of AAA offers. This is usually done for Maths and Science-based degrees, as a very high level of accuracy may be required for a very challenging degree. Asking for UMS marks on top of AAA or AAAA offers used to be a lot more common before the introduction of the A* grade in 2009 - the A* grade was created partly in response to university admissions tutors who complained that they were having to confuse candidates with UMS requirements in order to get the best of the A-grade students.

However, many unis **only** make a **grades offer**. If you don't have a UMS specification alongside your grade requirements within the offer, **don't just assume** that an equivalent UMS score will be fine - it won't!

Many universities won't take, for example, an ABC set of results instead of a BBB set. There are a few reasons which influence this policy. Some universities like students to be good all-rounders, while some don't want anyone on the course who gets a C in any subject (or D, *etc*). Even an AAC set might not be good enough - and they would have no obligation to take you onto the course.

If you get results which make up an equivalent number of UMS points to your offer, but don't fit the exact grade stipulations, then the university will automatically reject you through UCAS. However, you may be able to convince them that you're still a good choice, and win back your place on the course if you call and ask them when you get your results. Their decision will probably take into account which subject you slipped up in: if your course is in History and you dropped a grade in Photography, they might consider that you've made up for it with an unexpected A grade in History itself. But there's only one way to find out: call, quickly!

Pooling and Clearing

Meanwhile, those students who applied to Oxford or Cambridge may have experienced another round in the applications process - pooling. There's some information about what pooling is and why it's done in '**Chapter Three: Choosing The University That's Right For You.**'

The pooling system is one of the areas in which Oxford and Cambridge differ from each other the most. Essentially, the applications system at Oxford is more centralised, while at Cambridge it's

more college-based. Both offer a pooling system to ensure that applicants to highly oversubscribed colleges aren't unfairly disadvantaged, but the Oxford system is highly synchronised, while Cambridge pooling is far more drawn-out.

Both interview periods take place at the same time, but while Cambridge will call you for scheduled interviews at a single college, Oxford will just ask you up to the university, where you may face any number of interviews from different colleges as they share feedback and discussion about you. The colleges communicate with each other very quickly and effectively, so one college may call another immediately after your interview to say that you were great but not for them, and that college will then ask for an interview with you. You may also be scheduled for interviews for more than one college at the beginning, so that two different types of tutors with different interests and teaching styles can give you two shots at an Oxford place. Because of this *ad hoc* interviewing system, it's important to **keep checking the notice board** at the college in which you're staying, in case another college wants to take you from a pool.

Case Study: Fred, 19, says, 'When I went up for my interview at Wadham College, Oxford, I was well prepared and had thought for a long time about what I wanted to say. I'd even practiced the right way to shake hands with the interviewers! But after the interview I was asked to stay the night in the college - and the next day a porter told me that St Edmund's Hall wanted to interview me later that day! I didn't know whether that meant Wadham didn't want me or just that they wanted a second opinion, but I didn't really have time to think about it: I just grabbed a map and ran! I also ended up being interviewed by Corpus Christi during my time at Oxford, which was supposed to last one night but ended up keeping me for four days. But at least it was all worth it when St Edmund's Hall (or 'Teddy's as I now call it) offered me a place.'

If this sounds stressful, it often is - but many students prefer it to Cambridge's more drawn-out pooling system. In the Cambridge system, you won't find out till January whether you've been accepted by the college that interviewed you, rejected, or recommended for pooling. After *this* letter, you'll have to wait to find out whether you'll receive another letter (or e-mail) from a college who wants to take you from the pool. This college may make you an offer based on your personal statement, grades, SAQ, written work and recommendation from your interview college, or they may call you back up to the university for a second interview. After the second interview, they may or may not decide to finally take you.

There's also a space on the SAQ form where you can tell Cambridge whether you'd accept the offer of a place for the next year - for instance if you apply for 2013 entry, they will ask if you'd consider waiting a year for a guaranteed place in 2014. You can always fill in this extra time with something useful and fun, like travelling or an internship - there are plenty of both short-term and long-term internships available on www.Getting-in.com's employment section. If you've said on your SAQ

that you'd be open to this a college which is really full for 2013, but definitely wants to teach you, may offer you a place for a year's time - if you accept it, you'll have a gap year on your hands, with the security of a Cambridge place at the end of it.

Oxford applicants are sometimes confused when they receive letters from a college which interviewed them saying that they don't have a place, but that the college **'believes you will soon receive an acceptance from another college.'** This means what it says, although it's possible to read all sorts of cryptic messages into it! The college admission tutors will almost certainly have spoken to other tutors at another college which interviewed you, and been told that you're likely to get a place. In most cases, a letter like this is followed within a few days with a letter from the other college making you an offer. **However**, this isn't always the case. 'Likely' means the dictionary definition in these letters: but a more qualified applicant, a more considered opinion, or a change of heart from an admissions tutor could mean that a 'likely' place never materialises. So if you receive one of those letters, **don't breathe out just yet!** Don't worry - you won't be kept in suspense much longer.

Because Oxford colleges collaborate to talk about undergraduate applications, it's also possible that the university will make you an 'open' offer. This means that **you have a place at Oxford, but haven't been allocated a college yet.** Oxford tutors realise that for many people, getting into the University is what counts, and the college is secondary. If you accept the 'open' offer, you'll be allocated an offer after results day - usually at a college which has had a lot of applicants unable to meet their grade offers. Once you've been given an open offer, your place is secure as long as you get the right grades: even in the unlikely case that no applicants in your subject fail to make the conditions of their offer, Oxford is still obliged to give you a place. **You've got in!**

The UK's other collegiate university, Durham, does not pool in the same way despite asking applicants to apply to a specific college. Because the colleges at Durham are for accommodation/ social groupings, not academic teaching, all the admissions choices are made by the departments, which then send lists of the students with places to the colleges they requested. If that college doesn't physically have room for you, they'll send it on to another college, so that you may receive a letter confirming a Durham offer for a different college to the one you chose. But this doesn't mean that you've been 'pooled' as a borderline candidate - just that there were more students applying to your chosen college than there were bedrooms!

Of course, Oxford and Cambridge applicants **aren't the only ones** who may have to end up being flexible and thinking on their feet when faced with alternatives to their original choices.

Any applicant who doesn't meet his or her grades for the Insurance offer will have to think very quickly on the 16th August.

You'll know whether or not you've met your grades - in case by some chance you've forgotten what your offer was (!) - by a change in your UCAS Track profile. If you've met the conditions for acceptance (grades), the code will have changed from CF (Conditional Firm) to UF (Unconditional Firm).

If not, then you'll have to start **planning a course of action**.

Some universities may take applicants who've missed their offer conditions anyway, particularly if they only missed by a couple of marks. Call up the university straight away if you miss either a Firm or an Insurance offer and ask them to consider you. Although almost all of the UCAS application takes place online, at this time the phone is better. It may seem scary, but tutors will be extremely busy and stressed at this point, and an e-mail can easily get lost at the bottom of an inbox. Accepting students who've missed their grades isn't the universities' main priority: you will have to fight for it. Don't cry or yell at them. Just ask to speak to the admissions tutor, reiterate how keen you are on the course, and if there were extenuating circumstances - mild illness, a question you hadn't covered in class - then explain them briefly. Then ask politely if they'd consider allowing you on the course.

The universities have absolutely **no obligation** to accept you if you miss your grades, even if that's by a single UMS mark - and it's becoming less and less common for them to take on students despite grade drops as universities get more oversubscribed. Most students who miss their grades have to apply for alternatives through Clearing if they still want to go to university that October.

Clearing is often dreaded by university applicants and teachers alike. But last year, the system helped over 47,000 people to find and get into degrees that they liked. You'll be eligible to use Clearing if:

- You didn't get the grades to meet your offers, and the universities refuse to take you
- You didn't receive any offers from the universities you applied to
- You declined all your offers, or didn't respond by the 9th May deadline

It's best not to plan any holidays or big commitments in the days around the results day (usually 16th August), as Clearing places disappear quickly and you'll want to be on the spot. Clearing places used to be available for around six weeks, but with the increased competition for places, and universities being less flexible when it comes to giving the green light to candidates who miss their grades by a couple of marks, many institutions say that in the last couple of years all their places have been gone **within a week**.

Clearing places are spare spaces on courses which haven't got as many people on them as the university wants. This could be because the course was unpopular or undersubscribed to begin with, or because some of the people offered places didn't make their grades. It isn't the case that only 'bad,' disreputable or easy courses are available on Clearing - but the less popular courses are over-represented. And any popular course which enters Clearing due to accepted applicants dropping a grade is quickly snapped up. So if you're disappointed when A-Level results come out, but you know you still want to go to university, don't waste too much time crying over spilt milk - **get on UCAS!**

Clearing courses are listed on www.ucas.com from the date that A-Level results come out. They are also published in *The Independent*, but most students use the Internet. To contact the institutions which have course places still available, you'll need your Clearing number. This will be generated automatically by UCAS when you miss your offer grades: the system is very well-coordinated. You can find it on Welcome/Choices on the UCAS Track site, or by calling **0871 468 0468**. Using Track to find it is probably best, though, as the UCAS phones may well be jammed.

However, in the same way that phone is best when asking universities if they'll allow some wiggle room for your grade drop, phone is best for calling them to ask about Clearing places. If you find a course you'd like to do on the Clearing site, phone the university directly and give them your Clearing number. Send an e-mail first by all means - but then hang on to the phone, even if they keep you on hold for hours! The tutors are probably spending their time on the phone, and not checking e-mails as regularly as usual.

Courses fill up so fast that someone else may take 'your' place if you have to hang up and go to find some information, so make sure you have all your 'numbers' to hand. Also, make sure that you have good reception and plenty of credit on your phone. And **flex your redial finger!** In 2010, Kingston University received 40,000 calls in 5 hours. Some Clearing candidates have Mum on the landline and Dad on his mobile, calling different universities while the student calls the third, ready to jump at whichever phone gets picked up first!

While you're calling, sit in front of the internet, doing some speedy research on the courses which have space available. Research the university - both official and unofficial sources - the city or location, and the course modules.

Most courses don't post required grades on Clearing, although there may be some indication of what's required. The way to find out whether or not you might be considered is to pick up the phone and ask to **speak to an admissions tutor**.

Treat the call as an interview. You can expect to be asked 'big' questions about your motivations, career plans or love of your subject in among requests for the correct spelling of your name or your UMS points. The person on the other end of the phone will be someone with **real authority**, and quite possibly the **person who would teach you** if you're admitted. So coming across as bitter or aggressive isn't desirable. Asking intelligent questions and showing that you've researched the course as best you could in the time available, both make a good impression. Of course, the best way to get a quick overview of the course, and to sound like you know plenty about it, is to read its profile on www.Getting-in.com.

The tutor will decide whether not to accept you by the end of the call. Ask them to confirm it in writing, and they may send an e-mail or a letter. If you want to accept it, enter the course as a choice in Track. The university will confirm it through UCAS online, and then send you a follow-up letter.

Be aware that Clearing can be **extremely competitive**. Every year, three or four students apply for every Clearing place. In some ways, it's even more stressful than the competition for 'normal' university places, because the best students don't always get the places. The admissions tutors will give the place to the first person they speak to and like - they won't wait to look at all the applications together. So acting quickly is key. Most people decide whether or not to accept offers within a few hours of receiving them.

However, there's no point in blindly applying for courses you don't want to do or universities you don't want to go to, just for the sake of entering uni in two months' time. If you're not keen on the course now, it will be very hard to spend **three years of your life** doing it; the same applies to a city or campus you don't like, or a course you feel won't challenge your abilities.

Remember that although a year might seem like a long time now, in the grand scheme of things it won't make much of a difference whether you start this year or next. If none of the Clearing courses jump out at you, there's no reason why you can't **take a gap year now** and apply for next year's university places.

Case Study: Inua, 20, says, 'I had a BBB offer for History and Swahili at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London). The course was perfect for me as I love History but also want to get my Swahili top-notch as I hope to work in development in southern Africa when I graduate. SOAS is really famous for its teaching of African languages and history, so I was really upset when a C grade in French stopped me from meeting my offer. I knew exactly what went wrong - I was so nervous in my oral exam that I couldn't think of anything to say and made some really stupid mistakes. Although I'd got three other offers for African History degrees, I'd only accepted SOAS as that's the only university that teaches Swahili in the UK. My parents made

me look through Clearing, but I didn't want to do any of the History degrees available. In the end, I decided that the only thing for it was to wait and re-sit that French oral. Now I'm really glad that I left it a year - I spent the time travelling in Burundi, where they speak French and Swahili, and got to practice both languages as well as getting some work experience! It really helped me when I retook the oral, and the A that I got brought my overall grade up to a B. Now that I'm at SOAS, everyone seems to have taken a gap year, so I'm not the odd one out at all - and I'll never forget my time in Burundi.'

If you don't get a Clearing place, or don't find one that appeals to you, there are other options as well. Some university courses start in January, or at other points in the year, as well as in October, and you may still have time to get onto those. You could also consider an **apprenticeship**, **foundation course**, or **work-while-studying** programme.

Or, like Inua, you could re-sit the modules that were disappointing and apply again for the course you really want. These are big decisions, but it's all **up to you**.

For more advice, you can call the Exam Results Hotline on 0808 100 8000. They're based in the UCAS headquarters, but the hotline's staffed by Connexions advisors who are trained in both counselling and careers guidance.

Overall, it's fairly unlikely that you'll be disappointed when you get your A-Level grades - most teachers know what they're talking about when they hand out your predicted grades.

Adjustment

And some people are able to take advantage of a fairly new UCAS service - one that's in some senses the opposite of Clearing.

Adjustment is a service which allows people who've exceeded their offers to enter Clearing in an attempt to find **better** university places than the ones they'd previously accepted, which ask for **more demanding grades**. So if you have a CCC Firm offer, and you get BBB, you might decide that you now want to use your grades to go to a more challenging or more prestigious university. If you enter Adjustment, your Firm university will make an exception to the rule that you have to go to your firm choice if you meet their conditions.

You're eligible to enter Adjustment if you've exceeded the terms of your Firm offer (*not* if you've matched them). If your offer was unconditional, you can't enter Adjustment, as technically you can't *exceed* if there were no conditions *to exceed!* If you get a good grade for a qualification that wasn't mentioned in your offer, this doesn't count as *exceeding* either. For instance, if your offer

was AAA, but you were doing four A-Levels and also got an A in your fourth, you should be very proud of yourself but you're not eligible for Adjustment.

Adjustment allows entrance into the Clearing system from a position of **advantage**: you've exceeded your offer grades, and so you have access to more challenging, prestigious or popular courses than those you originally selected. However, the process is the same - **find a course** that you like on the Clearing list, **call the admissions tutor**, and have a **phone call** which may end in an offer being sent to you. Some people already have a course in mind: perhaps one which rejected them with their original grade predictions or that they liked but thought they wouldn't get into. If you have a course in mind, it's always worth calling the university and asking if there are spaces left. Be realistic though. Very competitive universities, such as Oxford, Cambridge or the big London universities, are very unlikely to have spare places.

For this reason, entering Adjustment isn't always the best option. If you've exceeded good grades to get very good grades - such as scoring A*AA when your offer was AAB - there probably won't be many suitable places for you on the Clearing/Adjustment list. If you decide that you want to go to a better uni than the one you've confirmed as your first choice in this situation, your best option is to cancel your place and apply again next year.

If you enter Adjustment, you haven't sacrificed your original place. If you don't find a course you like more than your original choices, or if the admissions tutors turn you down, your Firm place will still be available for you.

Case Study. Khyla, 20, says: 'I really wanted to go to Aston University when I decided to build on my Business Computing BTEC with a full-time undergraduate degree - partly because a friend of mine had been there and loved it. I'd visited her and really liked the atmosphere of the place and the friendly relationships she seemed to have with her tutors. However, when I was applying I was let down by my BTEC teacher, who said he could only predict a DMM grade. This isn't good enough for Aston, who require a DDD, and I was rejected. As responses started to come in from other universities, two of which were firm conditional offers, I realised I still really wanted to go there. I began working really hard, and scored much better grades in my modules than I had done in the first year of the BTEC. By the time I got my final results - which confirmed that I had a place at my firm choice - they were DDC, which is more than Aston had asked for! When I called up the uni the tutors were just as friendly as they'd seemed when I was visiting my friend, and quite quickly said 'yes, we can offer you a place.' The offer came through on UCAS, and I'm off to Aston this September!'

UCAS Extra

Another option which students often don't realise is open to them is **UCAS Extra**, a very useful service which allows you to get a start on finding the **right course for you** if your original choices don't go as well as you'd planned. This helps students who didn't get any offers, or who have declined all their offers, to find a university place in a less frantic way than Clearing does.

Clearing is very useful, but it can be very stressful as places fill up so quickly. Plus, before the introduction of UCAS Extra, students who had been rejected by or declined all their choices early on in the year were left biting their nails in suspense until August came around - sometimes seriously damaging their ability to do well in their A-Levels.

You'll know that you're eligible for Extra when a box suggesting it appears on your UCAS Track form. This will happen if you've made the full five choices but won't be going to any of them, whether that's because you haven't been accepted or because you've declined offers.

Extra tells you which courses have vacancies still available, something which isn't possible in the main UCAS system where the popularity of courses goes up and down from year to year. These courses will have an 'X' next to them in the Course Search display which you enter through clicking on the Extra button from your Track form.

Just as in Clearing, it's **important not to 'grab'** a course in Extra simply because it's available and you're scared you won't get any place.

Remember that there are no rules saying that you *have* to go to university at the time you originally applied - there are a lot of other things you could be doing for an extra year while you reapply for the course of your dreams (as Inua found out in the [Case Study](#) above). If you see a course with vacancies that you like the look of, then start your research! Just like when you were applying for your original choices, you can **visit the campus, read the prospectus, and ask any students** you know who've been to that university or done that subject for advice.

If you decide you want to apply for any courses in Extra, remember that **you can only do it 'one by one.'** Through Extra, you can send an application (using the information already on your UCAS form, although if you're applying for a different subject you should alter your personal statement to reflect that) to a single course. You can't change that application for 21 days.

After 21 days, if the course has definitely rejected you or if you've changed your mind about it, you can withdraw your application and apply for a different course which has availability listed on the Course Search. This can be done **every 21 days** for as long as you like, although it's common for most people to stop looking and either receive an offer, or decide to make a new application next year, after a couple of successive applications.

However, you can't apply for another course until you've withdrawn the choice before!

Case Study: Daniel, 20, says, 'Because I applied to my Art courses through Route B, it was May before I had my final rejection back. I was really gutted, because I'd been thinking about how great it was going to be to go to uni in the autumn (my first choice was Brighton, but I was keen to develop my skills anywhere!) I really didn't want to retake exams in stuff I'd already studied while waiting a year to reapply. I was so upset that my Mum got on the computer and started researching, and she found out about UCAS Extra. I was surprised to see that Nottingham Trent still had places available as I knew that was a good university - somehow I'd assumed that only rubbish courses would be on Extra or Clearing. But when I applied, they got in touch in a few days to ask me to come to Nottingham for an interview! I was really nervous but just stepping into the campus I knew how important going to university was to me, and I could easily imagine spending three years in Nottingham. Well, I'm on my second year now and absolutely loving it! I can't believe I felt embarrassed to use Extra: no one cares how you got in once you're here, and I'm in the top five in my class!'

Changes?

UCAS recently proposed a massive overhaul of the system aimed to let students apply for universities **after receiving their A-Level results**. This would do away with Clearing, and with the suspense and pressure during the long wait until August to have offers verified. All that students would have to concentrate on would be working hard on their A-Levels, making the most of the online advice, guidance and past papers available on www.Getting-in.com. The suggestion was only made in November 2011, and it's not known whether it will be implemented, but it got loud support from several academics.

One of them, **famous Classics professor Dr Mary Beard**, said in a BBC News article that the current system is 'needlessly torturous' because you have to wait so long to know for sure whether you've got your place. She also said that the grade requirements were too narrow and crude, saying that they include 'ridiculously minute distinctions.' It's true that the couple of marks which separate an A* from an A, a B from a C or a C from a D are probably not the most sophisticated possible way of telling how likely it is that a student will do well at university.

Shabena Mahmood, Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, also thinks that reforms are long overdue. She told *The Guardian's* Harriet Swain that Clearing can be a 'nightmare,' as she saw her younger sister go through the system when she failed to get her grades.

It's **not known yet** whether changes will be made to the university system. With the current recession, and a government that hasn't been in power very long and has plenty of other things to worry about, a reform of a system that students, teachers and universities all over the country are used to might be tricky.

One thing is sure - if you're reading this in 2012, you'll have to **stick with the old system**.

Hopefully this chapter has told you what you need to know about the basic process of applying for university through the UCAS system. The next chapter, '**Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work,**' will give some guidance about the part of the entrance process that leaves applicants more intimidated and confused than any other.

Chapter Five: Interviews, Exams and Extra Work

If you're applying to university while still in sixth-form, chances are you'll never have undergone an interview before.

Even interviews for part-time jobs or work experience places tend not to focus on *you* and *what you know* as much as many university admissions interviews do. If you're applying to re-hang clothes in Topshop for four hours a week, you might be asked if you're reliable, if you 'like people' and if you can keep a smile on your face in the last twenty minutes of a back-breaking shift. But in a university interview, you could be asked such weird and wacky questions as:

- 'If you could save either the rainforests or the coral reefs, which would you choose?'
- 'How would you design a gravity dam for holding back water?'
- 'Why might it be useful for an English student to read the Twilight series?'
- 'If I were to visit the area where you live, what would I be interested in?'
- 'What does it mean for someone to take another's car?'
- 'Why does your heart rate increase when you exercise?'
- 'What is language?'

All of these questions are real-life examples, taken from a sample that the University of Oxford released in 2009.

It's no wonder, with stories about interviews as tough as this circulating, that many sixth-form students are intimidated by the idea of travelling to a new city and attending a university applications interview.

However, you're **much more likely** to face a challenge like this than the average university applicant used to be.

If you speak to your older siblings, they may well not know anybody who got called for interview or asked to complete an extra test during their university applications. Your teachers may also fail to mention it as a possibility, as for a long time British schools and colleges have been used to interviews and exams being absent from the system.

However, in today's **ultra-competitive applications environment**, you can't assume that good AS-Levels and predicted A-Level grades, plus a great personal statement, will be all you need. In fact, for some competitive courses, you're almost certain to be asked to complete an interview or an exam.

You might be nodding your head, thinking that you know that Oxbridge applicants have to do interviews and that this chapter doesn't apply to you, as you're not planning to chase the 'ivory towers'.

But in fact, although many people are still unaware of this, applications don't always stop with the submission of a UCAS form. Students applying to **any university, for any subject**, may well be interviewed, asked to provide samples of their work, or set the university's own tests and exams.

For a while, when there were fewer universities and fewer university applicants, every university interviewed almost every candidate. But for a long time, between the 1970s and the late 2000s, Oxford and Cambridge interviews got all the press because they were the only universities to interview applicants for all subjects.

Traditionally, the following types of courses interview applicants:

- **Oxbridge.** The best-known interviewers are the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Cambridge interviews over 80% of its applicants, regardless of their subject or college choice. Oxford interviews over 90% of applicants for the slightly less competitive courses, but uses quite a detailed short-listing system to decide which applicants to the more oversubscribed courses will get interviews. This can be as few as 30%. The lower interview proportion for Oxford is partly because that university asks around 80% of applicants (depending on their subject) to take special tests in their schools when they originally apply - more about these in the **Exams** section of this chapter, from page 113.
- **Medical courses.** This also applies to Veterinary Science, Veterinary Medicine, and many other health-related degrees such as Nursing, Midwifery or Optometry. Although not all of these conduct interviews, many of them do. This is partly because these courses are so popular, partly because they are very challenging, and partly because customer care and an ability to interact well with people can be just as important in the caring professions - or even more important (!) - as being very intelligent.
- **Very competitive universities.** Not only Oxford and Cambridge, but Durham, UCL, Imperial, LSE, Exeter and Bristol all interview sometimes. These universities interview candidates because they have to find more sophisticated ways of differentiating between several applications from people with predicted A and A* grades and great personal statements. You may receive a straightforward rejection or a straightforward acceptance from any of these universities (except Oxford and Cambridge, which don't give out acceptances without interviews unless the student comes from outside the EU) but **don't be surprised** if they invite you for interview first.
- **Very competitive courses.** If your subject is a very popular one, such as English, Chemistry or Law, you're more likely to get interviewed. This is for the same reason that the most

over-subscribed universities interview: it's hard to pick out the best students from a host of **very good applications**. Even if your subject isn't particularly popular and the university isn't particularly popular, if the combination of subject and university is very sought after then you're more likely to get interviewed: for instance, the University of Cardiff's Land Management course is always over-subscribed, and so they tend to interview candidates. As a general rule, the higher the entrance requirements for courses are, the more likely they are to interview.

- **Certain vocational courses.** Although Medicine is the only vocational course that will always interview, many other vocational courses are more likely to interview than academic courses with comparative levels of popularity and of entrance requirement grades. This is because some professions need you to be a **certain type of person**: you'll need confidence to do well in Business, a bubbly personality for Leisure and Tourism, *etc.* If the course tutors will be recommending you for work experience at companies they want to preserve a partnership with, they'll need to make sure that your personality won't put them off. **Teaching** (Education or Primary Education degrees leading to a professional qualification) always requires an interview.

Many people will sail through their entire university application with no need to attend an interview or take an exam - just as the vast majority of UCAS applicants will never enter Clearing or Adjustment. However, as universities become more and more competitive, and the average student's grades become higher and higher, universities are increasingly turning to formal or informal interviews to help them to assess the suitability of each candidate for the course to which they've applied.

Below is a small sample of courses which are known to sometimes call students for interview:

- Speech and Language Therapy at UEA (University of East Anglia)
- Biology at the University of Sheffield
- Geography at Canterbury Christ Church
- Advertising at Southampton Solent University
- Spanish at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford
- Physics at the University of Exeter

Why Interview?

Major university applications advisors like *Complete University Guide* tell applicants that there are essentially two types of interviews.

Sometimes, universities invite candidates to interview when they **already know that they want to take them**. They've already decided to make them an offer, but want to improve the chances of that offer being accepted (or made the Firm choice rather than the Insurance) by encouraging the candidate to form a bond with the university. This is a clever thing to do **psychologically**, as it means that the candidate will have personal memories related to the university. It also means that universities can weed out candidates who have only selected them as 'back up' choices and have no intention of going there: if the candidate turns down the offer to interview, it might be because s/he has already received an offer from his or her preferred university. As I've emphasised above, universities **want candidates who really want to do the course**.

When a university calls a candidate to interview in an attempt to convince him or her to choose that institution, the admissions tutors will be hoping that the interview process - visiting the city, perhaps staying in a student room, getting to chat with people who teach the course and, essentially, imagining themselves going there - will give candidates a good 'gut feeling' about the university.

Some of these interviews and 'open days' make it clear to candidates in the invitation letters or e-mails that they are optional, and that candidates' chances of being accepted **will not** be affected by their decision to turn up or not. If your interview request letter says this, the admissions tutors **mean it** - they're within their rights to reject your application for not attending an interview, so if that's the way they work they have no reason to conceal it. If you get a letter inviting you for an **explicitly** optional interview or open day, only go if you want to. These events can be brilliant ways to make your mind up about your choices by finding out more about the institution, and if you're pretty sure you'll go to that uni if they make you an offer, the interview/open day could be a great place to meet your future fellow students and teachers.

However, if you're invited for an optional selection event at a university that's very far away or at a date that's inconvenient, you'll have to weigh up whether it's worth it for an interview that might only be 10 minutes long. However, if you can get a cheap travel deal - or even entertainment deal - for the city the interview's in from **Getting-In's** deals section, why not pop up and meet your future tutors?!

If you're asked to attend an interview and the word 'optional' **doesn't appear** anywhere on the letter, it may still in reality be this first type of interview, conducted to encourage a good candidate to develop an attachment to the university. Only Oxford and Cambridge interviews, and interviews for medicine-related degrees, can be certain never to conduct this type of interview. Even top universities like UCL, Durham or Bristol will often interview good candidates for the sake of attracting them to the institution.

But you have **absolutely no way of knowing** whether or not the interview is simply a way of engaging you, coming from a university which has already decided to make you an offer, or whether it's the second type of interview: part of the admission process.

The **second type of interview** is given when the course admissions tutors have considered all of their candidates, may have made offers to the very best of the applicants, and feel that they need more information about you before they make their decision.

Some courses ask all students to interview, while some only ask those students about whom they feel that they need more information. The most commonly interviewed applicants - apart from those applying to Oxford or Cambridge courses or other courses where it's stated that interviews are always carried out - are mature students, or those entering an unusual or unexpected degree course.

*Case Study: Chris, 19, says, 'I was really good at science at school and I really connected with my science teacher, so the obvious AS-Levels for me were the science ones. I saved a space for History though as I really enjoyed the subject, and ended up liking the AS-Level so much that I dropped Physics for it when I took my 4 AS-Levels down to 2 A-Levels. Over the summer, I decided that History was actually the subject that I wanted to do for my degree. I was nervous because most History applicants are doing all essay subjects, like English or Politics, and it's true that I got interviewed a lot more than other people I knew applying to the same unis. At each interview, I just explained the truth: that I'd taken science subjects because they were the ones I got A*s in at GCSE, but I really loved History. They could see that my predicted grade for History was an A, but I think they wanted to see me talk about the subject to see if I was really passionate about it, as on paper I'm definitely more of a scientist! The interviews must have gone OK though because I got offers from four out of my five choices!'*

You may also be more likely to be interviewed if you have grades that are on the low side for the course, but a great personal statement - or **vice versa**, with great predicted grades but a poor personal statement. In each of these cases, the university doesn't know which aspect best reflects your potential, and which may have been exaggerated by your teachers or helpers. The interviews are a way for them to talk to you, see how you respond to questions, and hopefully find out a bit more about your potential.

If you get a request for interview, there's not much point in trying to second-guess the university to try and work out what their motivation is for asking you. You'll just end up scanning the letter for hidden codes that aren't there.

Instead, just take it as read that:

- **If the letter is from Oxford or Cambridge**, it's an interview as part of the admissions process. No one gets into either of these universities without an interview, unless they live halfway around the world - and even then they'll do harm to their acceptance chances if they don't book a plane ticket to attend. So if you've applied to one of these, **don't make unbreakable commitments during December!** If you're predicted the right grades and haven't completely messed up your personal statement or missed out part of the application, then these universities will invite you to interview, so don't get complacent or cocky because you've got an interview.
- **If the letter explicitly says the interview is optional**, then either they've already decided to accept you, or they put on a general open day for all their candidates. If they tell you that it doesn't matter whether or not you attend, then believe them. It can still be nice to go though, and can't do any harm!
- **If the letter doesn't say that the interview is optional**, then not going will hurt your admission chances. If you really want to go to that university, but it's **definitely** too expensive or inconvenient to go there (for instance, if you live in Aberdeen and Exeter have requested an interview, or if you've booked a holiday for that date), then you could try contacting the university and requesting a telephone interview instead - but the university has no obligation to offer this alternative, and turning down an interview, no matter how good the reason is, may well affect your chances of **getting in**. It's true that the interview might be a formality, a double-check on a decision that's almost certain, or a psychologically clever way to encourage you to accept an offer, but you have no way of knowing this.

It's best to treat any interview you attend as if it's an important part of the admissions process, even if you sense that it isn't. This is because, even if the admissions tutors have already decided to offer you a place, performing well at interview may lead them to make you a lower offer.

Even if nothing comes of your interview, it will still have been good practice for both job interviews in the future and university classes, where you'll get used to discussing your ideas.

Because interviews weren't very popular among admissions tutors for a pretty long time, teachers and university advisors often **don't tell students much about them**. Especially at state schools which have less money to invest in extra teaching time or university research, teachers often assume that their job in the applications process is over and done with when the UCAS form is submitted. So many students are left thinking - what is the point of an interview, and what are the admissions tutors expecting to find out?

One thing is for sure, and that's that today's candidates won't get quizzed on how much their parents make, which university sports teams they could contribute to (like Pete in the [Case Study](#) on page 8) or on anything other than the course, their experience of education, and perhaps some detail on their extra-curricular activities.

There are two main reasons behind most university admissions interviews:

The first is to get a more detailed idea of the candidate's thinking capacities, knowledge of a subject and general academic potential than some universities feel can be gained from an AS-Level result or a personal statement. The University of Cambridge in particular has often criticised the A-Level system, saying that it doesn't reward **creative thinking, general knowledge or theory** enough, and other universities in the past - especially the Russell Group - have put pressure on governments to change or replace the A-Level curriculum. Cambridge has even gone so far as to design its own qualification, the **Cambridge Pre-U**, which is a non-modular two-year course and, like A-Levels, offers three or four subjects for 16-18 year olds. The **Cambridge Pre-U** is still relatively rare, although it's becoming more and more popular, especially in independent schools.

However, Cambridge and other top universities, whatever their views on A-Levels, are well aware that these - and perhaps BTECS - are the only options available to the vast majority of British students. So you won't be disadvantaged by the qualifications you've taken. Universities which place little trust in A-Levels just turn to interviews to find out **a little more about you**.

The second is to check that your application really reflects **you**. Another flaw with the A-Level system is that it relies on 'predicted' grades - and over 30% of teachers predict grades higher than those achieved by the student. So a university might want to check that you **really are** an A* (or A, B, C) student. And the reference doesn't really help them to differentiate - almost all references are full of praise for the student, as it's in the teacher's interest to get him, or her, a university place. In the *very* rare case that a teacher just doesn't think you're good enough for the courses you've applied for, s/he won't write a negative reference, but will ask a teacher with a higher opinion of you to write it instead.

Meanwhile, the personal statement is supposed to show a more personal side of your academic character. I've spoken in the **Personal Statement** section of '**Chapter Four: Navigating the Application Process**' about the UCAS plagiarism software designed to make sure that you haven't just copied and pasted a personal statement, but some universities also like to make sure that you haven't had too much help.

Getting help with your personal statement, from whatever source, is **allowed** by UCAS and by universities. But the help you get should - like the service **Getting In** provides - be a means to let

your own achievements, experiences and opinions shine through. Like Shane in the [Case Study](#) on page 76, you may have a book which you haven't read listed on your personal statement: if you do, **make sure that you read it** before you go up for your interview, as the admissions tutors may well ask you about it to 'catch you out.' It's not just about remembering the content: if your personal statement is very well written, universities will want to check that your intelligence matches up to it. Don't worry *too* much about this. University tutors are well aware that nobody can talk as eloquently as they can write and won't be expecting you to use semi-colons or fancy rhetoric in your interview answers. But do make sure, if you're invited to an interview, that there aren't any parts of your personal statement that you don't understand yourself.

What Will Happen?

It's not surprising that many sixth-formers are wary of interviews, as they are given so little information by teachers and advisors about what will happen.

When you sit a GCSE or AS-Level exam, you have a rough idea of the kinds of things you'll be asked. You won't know the exact questions in advance, but you will know the topics, the time periods, the works of literature or art that you'll be asked about. You can even use **Getting-In** to look up past papers and get other kinds of more comprehensive help, based on the questions that have been set in the past. The National Curriculum makes sure that if you've paid attention in class and done your revision, you won't be completely nonplussed by an exam question.

But there's no regulatory system for university interviews, and you **could be asked almost anything**. This idea sends many applicants into a tailspin of worry, fuelled by regular newspaper articles about wacky Oxbridge questions.

The truth is, though, that **universities have no interest in trying to catch you out**. While it's good to have read around your subject, and thought about it outside of school, you won't be asked about specific topics that aren't in the curriculum unless you mention them first. The admissions tutors aren't trying to catch you out.

You may be asked questions that you don't 'know' the answer to, but this doesn't mean that the tutors are looking for a 'right' answer that you're not giving. Instead, many interviewers like to ask questions which have no definite answers - 'What is language?' is a good example. This is because university sees the end of study for which there are 'right' and 'wrong' answers: degrees are judged on creative and original ways of thinking about difficult subjects. So if you're asked 'What is language?' or 'How would you go about devising a marketing plan?' don't try to work out what the interviewer wants to hear: just give them your honest opinion. And, just like in Maths lessons, **show your working!** Interviews are a chance to think out loud.

Case Study: Sadie, 21, says, 'At Bath, where I study Social Work, a lot of people have interview 'horror stories' where they froze or clammed up - although it can't have been that bad, as they all have places now! I always feel a bit guilty when people talk like that, as I actually really enjoyed my interview experience. At school, I didn't have anyone to talk to about my ambitions, and though I had a good relationship with my Sociology teacher, we didn't really talk outside of class. When I was asked 'What is the role of a social worker?' in my interview, I just started talking about the problems I'd seen in the news and how I thought they could have been prevented, what I thought should be the priorities for a social worker, how academic sociology can affect people working in the field... Eventually I stopped when I realised how long I'd been talking! Now that I'm at uni I know that most of what I said was pretty naive, but at the time I was just so pleased, once I got into it, to have the opportunity to talk like that. I walked away on a high, and I've found out that the interview was a pretty good introduction to doing a degree: now I talk with the other people on my course whenever there's a new development or story about social work, and put all my thoughts together into essays every term. I love it!'

University interview questions are the closest that many students have got so far to the experience of discussing **difficult academic questions**: that's why tutors ask them. A lot of the time, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences, it's not the things you say that are important - as Sadie points out in the Case Study above, university applicants are often wrong about a lot - but the **way that you think**.

Even science subject tutors often ask questions that somebody with a great deal of knowledge would still struggle to answer in an interesting and creative way: one of the main differences between a good A-Level science or maths student and a good undergraduate is the jump from a thorough knowledge of science to a creative one.

This means that interviews are very hard to really **'prepare'** for. But it's the uselessness of preparation that attracts some admissions tutors to the interview system: students can be prepped by teachers or pushy parents for their predicted grades, exams, written work and personal statements, but in an interview room they only have themselves to rely on. This means that no student has an unfair advantage.

Having said that, it is always worth **doing some preparation** for your interview. This is especially true of applicants for science and maths-based degrees: one Oxford applicant was asked to write out the formulas for the structure of peptides on a whiteboard in front of his interviewers. If you're applying for this kind of degree, or another type that requires highly specialised factual knowledge, make sure that you have key formulas memorised, as you would if you were going to sit an exam. The interviewers might not ask you any factual questions, but you never know...

Applicants for more arts- or humanities-focused subjects could use the time ordering new books about the subject that they're applying for, using **Getting-In's** unique buy-and-sell classified app, or just setting some time aside to think about their favourite parts of the subject.

You may be asked to **read certain texts** as part of your application. You'll then be asked about them during your interview, write about them during an informal test, or have to discuss them in a seminar along with other applicants. Don't get scared about these before applying - they'll almost always be **very short**. It's not in the universities' interests to give you so much work to do in preparation for an interview that you fall behind in class or with revision.

Case Study: Lulu, 19, says, 'I got a letter from a Cambridge college asking me to an interview which would include a seminar, and asking me to read two poems in preparation for it. Only, I was so excited and panicked to get the letter that I must not have read the thing properly. The exact editions that we had to use were printed on the letter, and I thought that they meant we had to read all of the two books they were from: in other words, the 'Complete Works' of both Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, two of the most prolific poets ever known to man! After a week of panic-skimming the two 1000-page books, my mother came into my room holding the interview letter. 'You idiot,' she said sweetly, 'you only have to read two poems!' So then I could breathe again. I'm kind of glad that I did the reading: I now really like both poets, and I did get into Cambridge. I felt that I had an advantage in the seminar because I knew some background about the poets' work. But I fell behind in my work for my weakest A-Level subject, German, during those two weeks and though lots of revision in the spring meant that I did make my offer, I was really worried that that time was going to affect my grade.'

You could also be asked **questions about the specific university or course**. These aren't the most common types of question, but they are asked sometimes - so have a quick check online to see which modules are part of the course at the university which is interviewing you, and to remind yourself of why you chose that course in particular, as well as why you made the more general subject choice. It's a good idea to remind yourself of the modules offered on the course, and the specific emphasis which it gives to the subject - the classic example is the wide variation between science-based and social science-based Psychology courses - in any case. Even if you're not asked directly about them, you don't want to put your foot in it by talking about how much you love linguistics to a tutor whose course doesn't offer it, or how much you're looking forward to the practical modules of a Business Studies course which is wholly academic.

Of course, if you've selected your courses carefully, the modules and interests of the course will overlap closely with your own interests and priorities anyway! But there are always third, fourth

and fifth choices, and you don't want to alienate any of them before you know what offers you're going to get.

There's a **wide variety** in the difficulty of the interview questions. Some admissions tutors are genuinely looking for answers or explanations as to problems in your application: why did you get that D in Maths, is there a reason your personal statement is so short, why are you giving up a job to go to uni, *etc.* And some will check to see if you've **really** read that book you quote in your personal statement, whether you can be so articulate in person, what your thoughts are on a certain module of your course, and other fairly straightforward questions.

However, some universities - Oxford and Cambridge are known for this, but it's becoming a more and more common interview technique - want to see how well you can do when you're faced with the need to think on your feet. They may not ask you questions that are easy to anticipate, such as questions which relate to your personal statement, AS modules *etc.*, but will instead ask questions you've **never had to think about before.**

Some of these, released by the University of Oxford, are listed above on page 98. Others include:

- **Would you rather be a novel or a poem?**
- **How many monkeys would you use in an experiment?**
- **What would you do if you were a magpie?**
- **Should we have laws for the use of light bulbs?**
- **Is there such a thing as an immoral book?**
- **How does geography relate to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?**
- **If I were a grapefruit would I rather be seedless or non-seedless?**

These questions all seem shocking. They caused a small scandal when they were first published, as people wondered whether by deviating from the A-Level curriculum, they were discriminating against state school students.

But in fact, these questions are designed to do **just the opposite.** That is, they are intended to remove artificial bias in a student's favour that comes from having been overly drilled. Because the questions are unpredictable - the admissions tutors themselves may not decide what they're going to ask until the candidate is in the interview room - there's no way that *any* student can be prepared for them ahead of time. University is a time where you'll spend three years constantly being given new information, and asked to **develop your own thoughts** on it. So finding out how well you cope with using what you **already know** to answer a difficult question is both a very useful and very fair way of finding the best applicants.

For instance: you may well have opinions on the professor who's a grapefruit if you're applying to study Medicine, as you can talk about fertilisation within different organisms. And although the first question in the list above ('*Would you rather be a novel or a poem?*') may seem like a big leap of imagination, that's what the tutors will be looking for in English applicants - just as much as they're looking for an appreciation of the difference between different literary forms.

And of course, there is some truth in that old rumour: '*they're trying to trip you up!*'

Not because admissions tutors are sadistic people (well, most of them aren't, anyway!) or bigoted, but because they want to cut through any prepared answers to find out how you **really think**.

Sometimes they'll do this by asking very complex or difficult questions; sometimes they'll do it by asking ridiculously easy-sounding ones that challenge assumptions you've held for a long time.

*Case Study: Ali, 20, says: 'When I was interviewed by Emmanuel College, Cambridge, for English, I ordered all the books I'd mentioned in my personal statement and those recommended for the course using **Getting-In's** classified buy-and-sell app. I also tried to read some literary theory, even though it hadn't been taught at my school, to try to get a grip on difficult terms like 'post-structuralism,' 'psychoanalytics' and 'New Criticism.' At my interview, they said hello to me nicely and shook my hand, asked me how I was, and then said 'So what have you read?' I thought they'd forgotten what was on my personal statement, so I started reciting my course texts, then the books I'd written about on my PS... neither of the two interviewers said anything, just nodded and smiled. They clearly expected me to continue, so I just kept listing books, but all of the impressive-sounding ones just went out of my head! I knew I'd hit a real low when I said 'Harry Potter...' - I think I was influenced by all the Hogwarts-y architecture around me - but then they jumped in and started asking me what I thought about the Boy Wizard! 'Can something so popular be any good?' one of them asked, and I felt like they were trying to trip me up. But I answered as well as I could - and now that tutor is supervising me for my third year dissertation on JK Rowling!'*

Whatever you're asked, the important thing is not to **hold back**. Don't ever be rude, but say exactly what you think about the question you've been asked. Anything that you think is too weird, or too obvious, or not academic enough, probably isn't: the only thing to watch out for is parroting stuff you've heard your teacher say in class, as the tutors will probably have heard it all before.

So number one tip for difficult interviews: say what you think!

A few more tips are given below:

- If one of your parents comes with you to the interview, **get them to leave you alone** for at least an hour before - tell them you need some time alone with your books, or that you need to browse student deals or internships on www.Getting-in.com. You can go and get coffee in separate coffee shops. Not only is it generally a good idea to get some time to clear your head before going into interview, but having parents around can interfere with your ability to feel like a mature, academic person, and to remember what **you** want. More than one university has spoken out to say that when applicants arrive at the interview room door with a parent, or are too obviously influenced by their parents in deciding what they want to do, it's a bad thing. In May 2011, Anglia Ruskin admissions tutor John Rayment told *The Guardian*, 'If students come across as dominated by parents, we feel sorry for them, but it usually has a negative impact.'
- **Prepare for obvious questions:** *Why do you like our course? Why do you want to get into advertising? What is your favourite book?* Even if these questions aren't asked, thinking about them will be helpful.
- **Don't be too long or too short in your answers.** Obviously, one-word answers are bad. If somebody *does* ask you 'If I were a grapefruit, would I rather be seedless or non-seedless?' (like the Oxford admissions tutor on page 107), they're not looking for the answer 'Seedless!' So elaborate on all answers. But don't just talk on for the sake of talking. If you feel you've **really** said everything interesting you have to say about a question, then tell them that 'that's it, really.' Don't worry: they'll have plenty of other questions waiting if there's still time left!
- **Have some of your own questions memorised.** Your parents will tell you that this rule also applies to job interviews: you may be asked near the end if you have any questions to ask the interviewer, and although it's not compulsory to ask any, it makes a good impression if you show an interest. Don't ask them the kinds of questions they've been asking you, about their own academic beliefs or personal motivations. Ask about any gaps in the prospectus, what the usual teaching style is, or how the course is assessed. They want to see you considering your decision with maturity.
- **Don't worry about pauses or silences.** It's better to leave a ten second silence before a great answer than rush straight into a knee-jerk one.
- If you're not sure what a question means or what exactly they're asking, then **ask your interviewers to repeat or rephrase the question.** They're unlikely to hold it against you if you give a good answer once you understand the question.
- **Work towards a conversation.** The most relaxed and confident applicants are the ones who speak at interview as if they were having a chat with an intelligent friend or talkative teacher. Don't be afraid to criticise the interviewer's viewpoint, if they offer one: chances are it's not their opinion anyway.

The last of these points is one that it's always good to remember: admissions tutors may play devil's advocate. So if they say something that really offends you or insults you - they won't say anything crude, racist or aggressive, but depending on your subject they could ask something like 'What's the point of benefits?' 'Why do young people spend so much time on the internet?' or 'Where's the evidence for God?' - remember that it's almost certainly just a way to provoke you into answering honestly. **Fight it out - they want you to!**

The Practical Side

That's all very well, you may be thinking, but it only explains what to do when you're actually in the room!

How am I going to cope with the stress of going to a completely new city and organising a good interview?!

This worry is particularly acute for Oxford and Cambridge applicants, as they often spend multiple days and nights in the universities as they pass through successive interview rounds.

Interviews at some other universities may also end up with you needing to stay the night. It's very rare for a non-Oxbridge university to ask for interviews on more than one day, but if you live in Belfast and are asked to interview at UCL, it's obvious that you'll probably have to stay the night. If it looks like you're going to have to stay the night, **contact the university** as soon as possible and ask them about arrangements for accommodation for interviewees. Most universities will either already have a system in place for housing you - for instance, many universities keep some student bedrooms empty to house conference guests, and make these available to applicants - or will waive the interview if they realise that you just can't make it without staying the night.

However, no universities will offer an overnight room for parents accompanying you - partly because of a lack of space, but also because they don't particularly encourage parents coming up with you (see page 108). So if you're staying overnight, prepare to be able to cope by yourself - and make sure you take your mobile charger to call home if you need to!

Regardless of which university is interviewing you, **don't be intimidated by staying on campus.** Contrary to some rumours, the admissions tutors aren't hanging around in the student bar to conduct informal evaluations of interviewees: they're far too tired after a long working day to stay 'on-duty!' So while you're not actually in the interview rooms, treat the experience of staying at one of your university 'choices' as a **fun trip away** in a hotel, where you get to see a new city and may have complimentary soap in your bathroom!

Many Oxford interviewees are particularly nervous about staying at Oxford, as the university's on-the-spot pooling system (explained on page 89 in 'Chapter Four: Navigating The Application Process') means that the university doesn't tell you for sure how long you'll be up there. But this doesn't have to be a big problem as long as you prepare for it. No school will mind how many days you miss if it's to attend Oxford interviews, so don't worry about that. If you have a part-time job, it's best to cancel any shifts you're booked for which take place for a few days after the stated interview date. If you're coming to Oxford by train, you can book an open return fairly cheaply if you book online in advance **as soon** as you get the invitation letter (and an open return will cover you unless Oxford ask you to stay for over a month!) If you need a better deal, just check out **Getting-In's** special student deals section - sixth-formers are eligible for many of these deals.

When you get there, make sure you check in with the **notice board** in the porters' lodge on a very regular basis, as this is the means that other colleges will use to notify you if they want to call you in for an interview. And if you get asked to an interview that means you'll have to stay another night, go to the porters and ask them about extending accommodation. You **won't** be left out in the street.

University interview stays can be stressful because none of your friends are there - but in fact **this is a great time to make friends!** If there are other students staying at the university at the same time as you, there's no reason not to have a chat with them. Sharing your fears and hopes about the interviews will make you feel less alone, and you could end up making friends who will last a lifetime. Plus, bouncing ideas off your fellow interviewees is a great way to practice for the interviews!

Don't worry about other people stealing your ideas: this is pretty hard to do, and they'll likely have their own strong opinions to get across anyway.

Case Study: Kayo, 20, says, 'Part of my interview and audition for Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent involved a seminar where all the applicants were supposed to discuss a play we'd read beforehand. But I didn't really think about it much, focusing on the practical audition instead, until I met a girl, Tilly, who was also there to be interviewed in the student union bar on the night before the seminar. We started talking about the play we were supposed to discuss - Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller - and found out that we both had really strong ideas about the main character: I hated him, Tilly loved him. We fought a bit about it over our rum and Cokes, and I went to bed feeling relaxed and happy that I'd at least made a new friend even if I didn't get a Kent place. But the next day in the seminar, someone said something that set me and Tilly off again: only this time we were used to talking to each other and more relaxed. I was really interested in the discussion, and we both got offers! Plus, now Tilly's one of my best mates here.'

Some students staying at Oxford or Cambridge colleges can be even more confused and intimidated by the experience of staying for a night or more. The strange historical architecture, odd sights like people wearing ‘Harry Potter’ gowns, and the sheer *poshness* of many tutors and professors can leave people feeling disorientated.

But in fact, Oxford and Cambridge colleges are some of the **easiest** university spaces to navigate. They’re all smaller than whole universities, and they all have ‘porters’ lodges’ at the front. (Some other universities, like York, also have porters’ lodges.) The ‘porters’ may seem like an archaic tradition, especially with their often old-fashioned uniforms (think bowler hats and frock coats at some colleges!) but in fact the ‘porters’ lodge’ is like an extra-friendly office reception desk. If you’re lost, don’t know where you’re supposed to be, or have any other queries at all, just go straight into the porters’ lodge and ask whoever’s behind the desk. Even if they don’t know the answer to your question, they’ll be able to instantly phone whoever *does* know the answer. And it’s **their job** to help you organise yourself! ‘Porters’ lodge’ is often shortened to ‘plodge,’ so if a professor or current student tells you to ‘go to the plodge,’ that’s what s/he means.

Of course, not all organisational pitfalls are easy to extract yourself from. Probably the **single most important** thing to do for your university interview is **not to be late for it!** Don’t just Google Map the directions and assume that you’ll be able to follow them easily, or even worse, rely on a smartphone which might run out of battery or lose internet connection. Write out exactly how to get to your interview, ask Google Maps how long it will take to get there from the station, and then **double that time**. If you have an interview within the same college at which you’re staying, allow half an hour between leaving your bedroom and arriving at the right room. Winding medieval corridors or sprawling Sixties breezeblocks can be hard to navigate, and you don’t want to worry about timekeeping when you should be focused and unflustered.

When you get to the door, the way that you act in the interview room will depend to some extent on which side of the academic/vocational divide your course comes down.

If you don’t know which it is on, consider whether the course teaches the **specific skills needed to practice** a profession, or just the **background to the profession**. For instance, although Law is a course which often turns students into lawyers, many law courses don’t teach skills such as client communication or how to prepare a brief: rather, it teaches the history and politics of the legal system.

Interviews with academics won’t be taking into account the way that you present yourself, whether you seem shy or confident, *etc*, as long as the content of your answers is good. So don’t worry about how you’ll impress the tutors with the way you’re dressed, the way you shake hands, whether you have a nice smile, *etc*. Academics are some of the least looks-conscious people in the

world (!), and are aware that the way people present themselves often has very little to do with what's going on in their heads. If you don't believe me, take a look at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's early press shots and ask yourself whether Harvard would have taken the jeans-wearing computer genius if they judged candidates on how well they're dressed! Although job interviews often need you to be very confident, assertive and show great body language, university admissions tutors have different priorities: so **don't worry about not being polished**.

Case Study: Lillian, 32, says, 'When I showed up for my interview to get into the Marine Biology course at the University of Southampton, I had bright blue hair.... I'd been worrying about not sounding 'posh' enough to be a scientist, too, as I'm from South London and have a pretty rough-and-ready accent. But I decided that if they didn't like me as I was, I didn't want to be there anyway. So I just put on a big grin and concentrated on what I was saying, not how I was saying it. And now that I'm a post-grad working on research in California, my accent sounds 'exotic' to people and my hair (now pink) means people never forget who I am!'

However, admissions tutors for some careers-focussed vocational courses - for budding doctors, social workers, museum assistants, publishers, etc - are looking for specific kinds of people, just like interviewers for full-time jobs. Their main focus will still be on the content of your answers, but your manner and presentation may also affect their decision. For instance, if you're applying to work in a caring profession and seem very abrupt and don't smile much, they may wonder whether you'll be suited to working with people for 40 or 50 hours a week. Similarly, admissions tutors for a degree like Advertising or Sales & Marketing know that success after graduation will depend on candidates being driven, ambitious and confident, so applicants who seem very shy or are sloppily dressed may be at a disadvantage.

The best way to make a good impression with your presentation for these types of degrees is to imagine, during the interview, that you're **already working in that field** - even if you're not. You don't want to present the image of a seventeen-year-old student: you want to present the image of a charismatic advertising executive, a friendly primary school teacher, or a relaxed and knowledgeable physiotherapist. Although this kind of acting shouldn't get in the way of the **most important part of the interview** - delivering thoughtful and original answers to questions - it is useful to be aware of the need to present a certain image.

Tests and Exams

As well as interviews, some courses require applicants to take extra tests or exams in addition to their A-Levels or other further education qualifications.

If you're thinking of applying for any of the courses listed in Table One within **Inset Seven** (page 115), you should spend the summer finding out whether the universities you're considering require any of the special nationalised tests - and if they do, in registering for them and working out what you'll need to do in them!

Will I have to do a test or an exam?

Traditionally, few universities ask for additional tests to supplement A-Levels before they make decisions about candidates; Oxford and Cambridge being the exception, with a long history of testing applicants according to their own criteria, not the National Curriculum's.

But this also used to be the case with **interviews**.

Now, more universities than ever before are using standardised tests to assess candidates' suitability for certain courses. For instance, Cambridge and Warwick have always asked Maths applicants to get good grades in STEP papers as a condition of entrance. But in February 2011, education charity Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI) revealed that **for the first time**, universities including Bath, Bristol and Imperial College also asked for STEP papers. Although it's hard to revise for a STEP test, it won't hurt to work on the past A-Level papers available in **Getting-In's** exam preparation section.

Not all of these institutions will **always** make STEP a condition of an offer just because they say that they use it in their decision-making process. Imperial, for instance, explicitly stated to *The Guardian* that they will never use STEP as a condition of an offer unless they know that the candidate has access to training resources for the test, and teachers who know how to book him or her into it.

However, if you're thinking about taking one of the very competitive degree courses which are known to request test or exam score (as seen in **Inset Seven** on page 115) it's definitely worth finding out if there's any way you **can** take the tests. Although some admissions tutors say that they won't hold lack of a STEP test against an applicant, if you have four As and no STEP test and the applicant next to you has four As and a top-scoring STEP test, it will be hard for the tutors not to take the STEP into account.

The STEP test is taken along with A-Levels, almost as an 'extra subject.' It enters the application process when universities make good marks in the STEP a condition in their UCAS offers.

But this isn't the only way for tests and extra exams to enter into the application process. There are three points at which your application could require you to deal with an extra test or exam:

- **As a condition of an offer made through UCAS Track.** As stated above, Cambridge and Warwick *always* make STEP a condition of entry, and state so clearly on their prospectuses. Other universities, which *sometimes* make STEP a condition, will probably feel you out about your capacity to prepare for and take the STEP test at interview. A requirement for a test or exam beside the ones you've said on your UCAS form that you're already taking (*i.e.*, your A-Levels, BTECs or IB) **won't** just appear on your offer letter with no warning, so don't worry about suddenly finding this requirement. But you **should** double- and triple-check the course prospectus and ask about the possibility of extra tests at interview, if you're applying for one of the subjects mentioned in Table One and Table Three of **Inset Seven**. As Bristol, Bath and Imperial have shown with their new requirement this year, this is a volatile and changeable time, and admissions procedures are in constant flux.
- **To be submitted along with the original UCAS application.** Many of the tests listed in Table One in **Inset Seven** are taken early on in the winter term (as can be seen in the timeline on page 67 within **Inset Six**). In addition, the University of Oxford asks about 80% of candidates to submit a test along with their applications. These could be one of the Table One tests. Or it could be a thinking skills assessment (TSA) or a unique test specially designed by the college and course you're applying for. Except for these exceptions, a request for a test to be submitted with the UCAS form is pretty rare. But with all the changes happening, it's hard to predict whether 2012 or 2013 could see this form of testing become more commonplace.
- **Taken along with interview.** It's fairly common for interviews at more competitive courses to include an exam. Any university might ask you to sit a test (either the TSA or a unique and specially designed test) for any subject during the interview period. This means that you'll be sitting the test **on the same day** as your interview. The University of Cambridge often does this, but it's not the only university to do so - and the frequency of exams at interview is going up in proportion to the increase in university courses inviting candidates to interview. You can find out which Cambridge colleges use the TSA from each college's website. Colleges or other universities which use specially devised tests as part of the interview process will almost always tell you about them in the letter or e-mail asking you to interview. Some may ask you to complete an informal test or questionnaire at interview without much warning, but if they do this, you know that the test isn't very important and that they don't *expect* you to have prepared for it. As long as you **carefully read the course prospectuses and any letters or e-mails from the universities** there won't be any secret about the admissions that you're expected to know: both the universities and UCAS are very careful to make sure that everyone receives the same information.

For some subjects, there are a bewildering variety of tests.

The tables in **Inset Seven** below aim to give you a quick look at the institutions which **regularly and routinely** ask candidates to take tests, either along with their applications or as part of their offers. However, it's important to remember that **any institution** can decide to make a test, whether centralised or specific to the institution, part of the admissions process. As long as they tell you that the test will be required before it happens, it's allowed - and, as the education charity MEI pointed out, more and more universities are choosing to test.

So don't take **Inset Seven** as the definitive list of universities requiring good results in tests other than A-Levels - always check with your course prospectus and/or department.

Inset Seven: Which Courses Test?

According to Cambridge Assessment data from AssessNet.org.uk, published in 2011, the following standardised and centralised tests exist for applicants to undergraduate courses. Any institution **may make** a good performance in any of these tests a condition for entrance to the appropriate subject.

Table One: Which Universities Ask For Which Exams, For Which Courses

- **Dentistry courses** at the universities of Aberdeen, Cardiff, Dundee, Durham, UEA, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Keele, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, Southampton and St Andrew's, and at Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Hull York Medical School, Imperial College London, King's College London, Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen's University Belfast, and St George's (University of London) ask for the **UKCAT**
- **Dietetics courses** at the university of Ulster ask for the **HPAT**
- **Law courses** at the universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Durham, Glasgow, Manchester, Nottingham and Oxford, and King's College London and UCL (University College London) ask for **LNAT**
- **Mathematics courses** at the universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Oxford and Warwick, and at Imperial College London ask for **STEP**
- **Medicine courses** at the universities of Aberdeen, Cardiff, Dundee, Durham, UEA, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Keele, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, Southampton and St Andrew's, and at Brighton and Sussex Medical School, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Hull York Medical School, Imperial College London, King's College London, Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen's University Belfast, and St George's (University of London) ask for the **UKCAT**
- **Medicine courses** at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and at Imperial College London, ask for **BMAT**

- **Medicine courses** at the university of Warwick, at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, and at King's College London, ask for **MSAT**
- **Occupational Therapy courses** at the university of Ulster ask for **HPAT**
- **Psychological Sciences courses** at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and at Imperial College London, ask for **BMAT**
- **Physiotherapy courses** at the university of Ulster ask for **HPAT**
- **Podiatry courses** at the university of Ulster ask for **HPAT**
- **Radiography courses** at the university of Ulster ask for **HPAT**
- **Speech and Language Therapy courses** at the university of Ulster ask for **HPAT**
- **Veterinary Medicine courses** at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, at the Royal Veterinary College and at Imperial College London, ask for **BMAT**

Key

UKCAT = UK Clinical Aptitude Test

HPAT = Health Professionals Admissions Test

LNAT = National Admissions Test for Law

STEP = Sixth-form Examination Papers

BMAT = BioMedical Admissions Test

MSAT = Medical Schools Admissions Test

The University of Oxford also routinely uses its own version of the Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA) to assess applicants for PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics), E&M (Economics & Management), EP (Experimental Psychology) and Psychology and Philosophy. It also uses the ELAT (English Literature Admissions Test) for applications to study English.

University College London (UCL) uses the TSA for its European Social and Political Studies undergraduate course.

Some colleges at the University of Cambridge use the Cambridge version of the TSA. A list of the colleges which have declared that they regularly use it is below - **but any other college and course may use it**. Ask the college you're applying to or are thinking of applying to if you're not sure whether you'll have to take it. (The table comes from Cambridge Assessment.)

Table Two: Which Cambridge Colleges Use the TSA for Which Courses?

Computer Science: Christ's, Churchill, Clare, Corpus Christi, Downing, Emmanuel, Fitzwilliam, Girton, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Jesus, Murray Edwards, Newnham, Pembroke, Peterhouse, Queens', Robinson, St Edmunds, St John's, Selwyn, Sidney Sussex, Trinity Hall, Wolfson.

Economics: Christ's, Churchill, Corpus Christi, Downing, Emmanuel, Fitzwilliam, Girton, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Jesus, Murray Edwards, Newnham, Pembroke, Peterhouse, Queens, Robinson, St Edmunds, St John's, Selwyn, Trinity Hall, Wolfson.

Engineering: Churchill, Clare, Downing, Emmanuel, Fitzwilliam, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Jesus, King's, Lucy Cavendish, Newnham, Pembroke, Queen's, St Catharine's, St Edmunds, St John's, Selwyn, Sidney Sussex, Trinity Hall, Wolfson.

Land Economy: Christ's, Jesus, Lucy Cavendish, Murray Edwards, Newnham, Robinson, St Edmunds.

Natural Sciences (Physical): Churchill, Clare, Downing, Emmanuel, Fitzwilliam, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Murray Edwards, Newnham, Peterhouse, Queens', St Edmunds, St John's, Trinity Hall, Wolfson.

Natural Sciences (Biological): Churchill, Clare, Emmanuel, Girton, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Jesus, Peterhouse, Queens', Robinson, St John's, Trinity Hall, Wolfson.

Philosophy: Lucy Cavendish.

Social and Political Sciences: Churchill, Clare, Gonville & Caius, King's, Newnham, Pembroke, Queens', Robinson, St Catharine's, St John's.

In addition, the following courses use the universities' own tests as a routine part of the applications system (the table comes from AssessNet.org.uk again):

Table Three: Which Universities Set Their Own Tests for Which Courses?

- the University of Cambridge sets its own tests for Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Archaeology & Anthropology, Architecture, Cambridge, Classics, Education Studies, English, Geography, History, History of Art, Music, Oriental Studies, Philosophy, and Theology & Religious Studies
- the University of Nottingham Trent sets its own tests for Applied Biomedical Science
- the City of Bath College sets its own tests for Business Management
- the University of Oxford sets its own tests for Classics, Computer Science, Economics & Management, English & Modern Languages, European & Middle Eastern Languages, Experimental Psychology, Fine Art, all varieties of Mathematics, Modern Languages * Linguistics, Music, all subjects including Philosophy, and Physics
- the University of Bournemouth sets its own tests for Computer Visualisation & Animation
- St Martin's College sets its own tests for Education, Nursing, Diagnostic Radiography and Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology
- the University of Westminster sets its own tests for Fashion Merchandise Management
- Bell College sets its own tests for Journalism
- the University of Birmingham sets its own tests for Social Work
- De Montfort University sets its own tests for Social Work
- NE Worcestershire College sets its own tests for Social Work

- the University of Nottingham sets its own tests for **Social Work**

This doesn't mean that only these courses set their own tests - just that these courses are the only ones which regularly and routinely do so.

The main centralised, formal tests are:

- **UKCAT.** This is a test of verbal reasoning (thinking logically about written information), quantitative reasoning (numerical problems), abstract reasoning (ability to infer relationships between facts) and decision analysis (how to make decisions in complex and ambiguous situations). There's an alternative UKCAT, the UKCATSEN, which is an adapted version of the test for candidates with special needs or disabilities who may need extra time. The UKCAT is taken **before you make your UCAS application** and the score submitted along with your form. More information at www.ukcat.ac.uk.
- **MSAT.** This is a multiple-choice test assessing lateral and conceptual thinking, and the ability to make choices in 'shades of grey.' The MSAT is taken **before you make your UCAS application** and the score submitted along with your form. More information at www.msat.co.uk.
- **HPAT.** This is the medical admissions test for Ireland, also used by Northern Irish universities. The HPAT is taken in February, and **may be a condition of your offer**. More information at hpat-ulster.acer.edu.au.
- **LNAT.** This is a computer-based test for admission to some law courses. It measures verbal reasoning skills through testing candidates' comprehension, interpretation, analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction. There is also an essay usually required by universities which use the LNAT. The LNAT is taken **before you make your UCAS application** and the score submitted along with your form. More information at www.lnat.ac.uk.
- **STEP.** This is a test designed to assess candidates' ability to use mathematics creatively to solve problems, as this is felt to be more relevant to degree-level maths ability than the more memory-based A-Level assessment. It's almost always used by admissions tutors on Maths courses, but **some colleges** at the University of Cambridge may also use it to assess applicants to Engineering, Natural Sciences, Computer Science and Economics courses. The STEP is taken in June, and **may be a condition of your offer**. More information at <http://www.admissionstests.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/adt/step>.
- **BMAT.** This test assesses both skills and knowledge, as well as testing how a candidate can apply the knowledge that they have. There is also a writing task. The BMAT is taken **before you make your UCAS application** and the score submitted along with your form. More information at <http://www.admissionstests.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/adt/bmat>.

What Are They Testing?! How Can I Pass?!

Tests and exams outside the standard National Curriculum aren't just intimidating for some students, but can also be very confusing. After all, everybody knows what their primary qualifications, which they've spent two years working on, are testing: there are very clear explanations of how many points are awarded for proof of different capabilities, and your experienced teachers will have spent two years explaining to you how to go about proving them. You can also get great advice and revision techniques, including past papers, on GCSEs and A Levels in the exam preparation section at www.Getting-in.com.

But many of the tests used by universities are either rare and little-known (as seen in Table One) or unique to the course and so completely unpredictable (as can be seen in Table Three).

If you're trying to understand what the tests **really want you to show**, you'll need to first understand **why** admissions tutors like to use the tests - which is why I'm grouping these two queries together.

There are various reasons why admissions tutors make the decision to test applicants. University of Oxford admissions tutors, for example - like the most competitive medical and legal courses - ask for tests to be submitted along with the application in order to lower their interview workloads.

But that's **not the only reason** why Oxford asks for good results in exams beside A-Levels - and it's not why other courses request exams either. Every university wants **the best applicants** to get onto the course: that's a given. But special exams are extra good at picking out the 'best' candidates for a few reasons:

- **Vocational courses are often looking for a certain type of character, not just good knowledge.** There are so many different tests for those hoping to start a course to train as doctors, or in other medical professions, because working in healthcare requires a very broad set of skills. It's not enough to just have great scientific knowledge if you want to be a doctor. You'll also need the ability to empathise and work with people; a great memory for very specific facts which you'll use when plucking drug recommendations from a range of very similar products; and brilliant problem-solving skills which can be translated into the diagnostic mind Hugh Laurie showcases in *House*. Similarly, Social Work courses request exams not just because they are popular and often oversubscribed, but because, as with medicine, a complex skills set of good memory, engaging care, and tough decision-making initiative is needed.
- Other subjects, such as Philosophy, Maths and Economics, have a **very big gap between the levels of competence needed for an A-Level and for a degree.** These courses use extra tests to assess thinking skills as well as the more fact-based knowledge needed to get good

grades in an A-Level. Many of the Oxford courses listed in Table Three in **Inset Seven** (PPE, Economics and Management, Experimental Psychology, and Psychology and Philosophy) use the official Oxford version TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment) test before they make the decision whether or not to interview applicants for this reason. Similarly, Maths at degree level has an extra 'creative' element which isn't really present at A-level. Other courses which have a larger than average leap in between the A-Level and undergraduate degree may also use a test. So while it's important to work on A-Level past papers at **Getting-In's** special revision section, you should also do a little extra mental exploration.

- Some courses - and some universities - **value originality** above almost any other trait in an applicant. These tend to be the courses that hit interviewees with very difficult interview questions. Similarly, the exams that these courses set tend to include unconventional questions.

One thing that all these exams have in common is that they're designed to assess **the way you think, not what you know**. Although many of the medicine-related tests do require the candidate to display great knowledge of his or her subject, it's the ability to analyse and deduce from this information that's really valuable.

Because of this, it's very hard to revise for these exams. There are some resources available, however. For instance, the LNAT website (www.lnat.ac.uk) has a host of free advice and content practice. Meanwhile, education charity **Maths In Education** offers cheap online STEP preparation classes. And if you're from a non-selective state school and have an offer from Cambridge, you can apply to go on a free preparation course run by the university. There are sample TSA questions on <http://www.admissionstests.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/adt/tsacambridge/Test+Preparation>, and a free guide to STEP at <http://www.maths.cam.ac.uk/undergrad/admissions/step/advpcm.pdf>. If you're looking for more cheap training, teaching or preparation, check out **Getting-In's** dedicated deals section for economical deals.

However, most sites offering preparation help for these tests and exams will only offer sample questions and answers - they can't give lists of things to learn or revision plans, because the tests aren't content-based. The LNAT website, for instance, despite its function of offering advice for candidates, specifically states that '**The LNAT cannot be revised for.**' This means that as there's no certain knowledge or way of structuring an answer that the test is expecting, you can't work on getting good grades in your usual way. However, the site does provide practice tests, as do many other standardised test sites. Doing these practice tests won't help you to memorise necessary content - because there isn't specific content (!) - but they will get you in the habit of thinking in the way that the special exams demand.

Case Study: Rudy, 26, says, 'It's hard to remember now that I'm a Mathematics postgraduate, but when I took the STEP for entrance to my University of Warwick undergraduate course, some of the requirements were completely new. I had to make up my own mathematical methods to think up ways of solving problems in an insightful way - although obviously, as it's Maths, there's still a 'right' answer, there are a lot of different ways of arriving at it! Nowadays, of course, working out my own methods is practically all that I do. But I think that in a way the STEP was harder than a lot of my day-to-day work now, because you have so little time to do it. I think that the exam skills - managing time, knowing when to give up on one problem or put the best answer you can before moving on to the next one - were almost as important for doing well as actually doing the thinking!'

The unstandardised tests set by universities and colleges are harder to prepare for: unless you know somebody who recently took the same test for the same course, it's quite hard to find out what's required. In these cases, it's worth having a look at practice questions for TSA and other official tests, because the university ones are likely to have a similar focus on creativity and originality. But it's best not to try to second-guess what will be on the tests. Just remember: **none of the other candidates will have any more inside knowledge than you.**

If it seems that the university hasn't offered you enough information on the tests, it's probably because they want to see how you **deal with the unexpected.**

The best way to prepare for any exams designed to assess creativity and originality is to do a lot of your own thinking. This means reading around your subject, and pushing yourself to challenge your own assumptions. This also applies to A-Levels and GCSEs, by the way: using **Getting-In's** past papers and resources is great, but you'll have to work hard to use these resources in the best possible way to get the best possible results.

This kind of thinking and reading can be a lot of fun, and doesn't have to be put into a special 'test revision' time slot. Writing a **diary or blog** of your thoughts can be useful as it gets your mind into the habit of analysing its own thoughts, and of working out the meaning behind newspaper articles, things that other people say, and books. If you have friends with similar interests, then **talking and listening** about your subjects is probably one of the most valuable things you can do.

A last point in this section: most Music or Drama-based courses will request, as part of an interview or exam, that you perform an audition for them. This chapter doesn't focus on these requirements because the talent you'll need to show in them is something that you will have developed during your teen years if you've decided to apply for one of these courses, and is very difficult to quantify. The best advice that you can get for these is from your **subject tutors.**

However, you can use some of the general tips in this chapter to prepare for an audition:

- Just like for vocational courses (see page 112) you can **get into the ‘mindset’** of an actor or a musician before these auditions by spending extra time practicing.
- You can **‘psyche yourself up’** to get yourself feeling confident and happy before you go into the audition.
- Remember that **there’s no ‘right’ way of doing this**, and that the tutors are looking for originality and passion (see page 104)
- The admissions tutors **aren’t trying to make your life hard** - auditions are an **opportunity**, not a deliberate attempt to trip you up.

Extra Materials

Some universities ask for work samples to be submitted in order for them to make a decision about your application. This request could be made:

- **As part of your original application**, e.g. for entrance to Oxford, Cambridge, or design courses.
- **As part of an interview or exam**. If you get invited to interview, you might be asked to prepare longer, written answers to one or more questions, to be discussed with the admissions tutors while you’re there.
- **As part of the short-listing process**. Some courses will ask for written answers to questions, extra personal statements, or other extra materials either **before** or **as an alternative** to an interview. The Cambridge ‘Additional Personal Statement’ is a little like this, although it is optional - and some of these requests are both compulsory, and can be a real factor in the tutors’ decisions. This type of request is designed to get more information about you, and is often used by very competitive courses. In addition, some candidates who can’t attend interview because they live a long way away, or suffer from a disability or other situation which makes it hard for them to attend, may be asked to submit additional material instead.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge always require samples of written work to be sent alongside the initial UCAS application. However, this isn’t something you need to worry about very much, as **existing** work is supposed to be submitted: *i.e.* your AS-Level coursework or an essay you’ve already handed in for your class. The subject teacher will be able to advise you on a good piece of work to send if you’re confused, but you shouldn’t worry about this part of the application too much. And if you haven’t completed all your coursework yet, why not make the most of **Getting-In’s** exam revision section, which has plenty of past papers and tips on how to maximise your results in both exams and coursework.

If you're applying for a course involving art or design, you will almost certainly be asked to submit a portfolio of your work. This applies to almost any course with an artistic design element, including Fashion, Illustration, or Gaming Design. Again, most of the contents of this portfolio will come from your AS and A-Level work, and you shouldn't have to add too much extra work unless you are a mature student. However, it's worth **'tidying up'** the portfolio, adding ideas that you didn't have time to complete or perfecting sketches and projects that didn't go quite as well as expected. One of the reasons for the later deadline (of 24th March) for some design-focused courses is that the tutors know that refining a portfolio takes time: so, unlike Oxbridge applicants, design students *should* be spending some time preparing their supplementary materials.

These are the only situations in which you can be absolutely certain you'll be asked for additional work. However, many courses (the UCL English course is a good example, as shown in the [Case Study](#) below) often ask for extra work. If you are asked for this, try not to become too stressed about it. Try to think of your additional preparation as a revision tool!

Case Study: Joachim, 18, says: 'I've just completed my application to the UCL (University College London) English course. I knew that it would be a competitive course, but wasn't expecting to be asked to complete so many supplementary application procedures. I've attended an interview, done an exam while I was there, and was also asked to write an essay about an extract from a Renaissance poem and send it in to them. In a way though, the processes have been really useful for my course. I enjoyed writing the essay because I didn't have to stick to the A-Level standard structure, and it's made me think a bit harder about the context around the Shakespeare plays I'm studying for my A-Level English course. The interview was also a great chance to clarify some of my thoughts while speaking, and I decided to treat the exam as 'exam practice'! In the end, I think the applications process has actually helped me to stay focussed, both by reminding me of the ultimate goal I'm after - a place at UCL - and by encouraging me to think around my subject. I hope I get in, but even if I don't, I don't think that any of the application preparation was a waste of time.'

Just like with interviews and exams, being asked for additional work may be because of your individual application (*i.e.* you're a 'borderline' candidate, or you have an unconventional education history) or may be because it's usual policy for that university. Don't worry if you face different applications requirements to your friends - you can't second-guess the reasons behind universities' decisions! Just perform whatever tasks you're asked to do **to the best of your ability**.

Chapter Six: Fees, Finance and Funding

If you're thinking of applying to university, you'll almost certainly have tuned into the huge uproar that's been going on since late 2010 about rising student fees.

It's a very confusing time to apply for an undergraduate degree, as the entire financing system changes under a new government. Current students are regularly protesting, universities and the government are criticising each other, and a lot of prospective students aren't getting the help and guidance that they need.

On page 11 of 'Chapter One: All About University,' I discussed the dynamics that are making some people wonder about whether or not university is worth it - and why the fee increase in 2011 caused the first **drop in application numbers** since 2005. The ideas I stressed there should be reiterated here: **yes, university is now expensive**, but for many people it's still worth it. It does mean, though, that you need to **be sure** about your decision to apply to university, and about really loving the course.

This chapter will take you through a detailed guide to student finance, fees and funding, as you work out how you're going to pay for your chosen degree. Before you read it, it's a good idea to have a skim of **Inset Eight**, which explains what all the various organisations related to student finance are, and what some of the complicated jargon means. This should help you to work out the labyrinth of finding, accessing, and processing your student loans, fees and funding. All of the terms and organisations referred to in this chapter are explained in **Inset Eight**, so if you find something you don't understand while reading the chapter, just flip back to this page! Throughout this chapter, terms and organisations explained in **Inset Eight** are marked with an asterisk, like this: *NUS**

Inset Eight: Key Student Finance Terms and Organisations

This inset is a glossary of key terms and organisations involved in student finance.

Browne Review - A government report published on the 12th of October 2010. It made the recommendations for changes to student finance which were carried out during 2011, and is often referred to when these changes are being discussed.

Bursary - An amount of money given to a student to support their studies, through paying off a fee or covering living expenses. Usually taken to mean an amount of money given to students depending on their family income or other circumstances (*i.e.*, to make university more affordable for students with limited resources).

DirectGov - Website giving citizens general advice about everything to do with the government.

DSA (Disabled Students Allowance) - Amount of money given to disabled students by the government to help them with living expenses.

EGAS (Educational Grants Advisory Service) - Institution making and managing grants to students from low-income families, especially those on benefits

Fee waiver - A university allowing you to attend without paying a tuition fee

Grant - An amount of money given to a student by the government which doesn't have to be paid back, ever.

Independent Taskforce on Student Finance Information - Established in 2011 by Martin Lewis from MoneySavingExpert.com, and including the NUS, NASMA, UCAS, and higher education representatives Universities UK and GuildHE, as well as several universities. Designed to give students good, impartial information and advice on student fees and finance.

Local Education Authority - Organisation responsible for organising the educational needs of school and higher education students within its area - including managing student fees.

Maintenance Loans/ Grants - Money lent or given to students by the government through the Student Loans Company in order to cover their living expenses.

NASMA (National Association of Student Money Advisors) - Independent charity advising students on how to deal with money.

National Insurance Number - Posted to you automatically when you turn 16, this number is used by both the tax and benefits service to track your finances and work history throughout your life.

NSP (National Scholarship Programme) - System established in 2011, and designed to help students with a low family income, managed by universities and colleges.

NUS (National Union of Students) - A union which represents students' interests by lobbying the government and organising events and organisations supposed to unite students around the country.

OFFA (Office For Fair Access) - A 'watchdog' for higher education, funded and run by the government but independent from it. Their mission is to make sure that students aren't being unfairly disadvantaged when applying to university because of money: *i.e.*, that nobody is stopped from going to university simply because they can't afford it.

RPI - Rate of inflation - the rise of a price for something of the same value that happens over time. You know how a Mars bar costs more now than it did when you were a little kid? That's inflation.

Scholarship - An amount of money given to a student to support their studies, through paying off a fee or covering living expenses. Usually taken to mean money given to a student based on his or her academic performance, *i.e.*, to reward the best students.

Student Awards Agency for Scotland - Similar to **Student Finance England**, but managed by the Scottish government.

Student Finance England - An organisation which processes loans made by the Student Finance Company, as part of DirectGov's services. This is the organisation you ask for official advice, or complain to!

Student Finance Northern Ireland - The equivalent to **Student Finance England** for students who are applying from Northern Ireland.

Student Finance Wales - The equivalent to **Student Finance England** for students who are applying from Wales.

Student Loans Company - Non-departmental public body which is responsible for organising and making loans to students in the UK, and for collecting repayments once they graduate.

Student Support Notification - Letter from the student finance organisation in your region (England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland) declaring how much money you will be lent or given.

The changes to student finance, which you may be hearing a lot about, are a result of the decisions of the Browne Review, which as you can see in **Inset Eight**, was published on the 12th November 2010. This Review made many different recommendations, but the one which had the biggest impact was that universities should receive far less funding from the government (with very large cuts of up to 60% or 70% to some departments) and that they should partly make up the shortfall by increasing fees.

Previously, student fees had been 'capped' at £3,465 per year - meaning that universities receiving funding from the government (*i.e.*, almost all of them) were forbidden from charging any more than this. However, the Browne Review recommended that this 'cap' be lifted completely, leaving universities free to choose how much they wanted to charge students for each individual course.

The coalition government, which had only been elected six months earlier, decided to put most of the Browne Review's recommendations in place. They made one big change to the recommendations by refusing to allow universities to charge an unlimited amount, and instead introduced a new cap of £9,000. The universities, which had just lost a lot of their funding, jumped at the chance to make back some of the money, and 47 of the best universities decided to charge the full £9,000 for all their courses. Out of those that didn't, almost all charged over £8,500.

This situation is embarrassing for the Liberal Democrats within the coalition, because while campaigning for election they had signed a pledge promising to abolish **all** tuition fees, so that university would be completely free for students. It has also led to criticism of the Conservative-led university cuts. There have been large protests in the streets as well as a lot of debate between academics, politicians and journalists with blame laid on all sides and by all sides.

For more on the politics behind student fees, have a flick through the online archives of *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*.

But for now, what's likely to matter to you is whether the student finance and funding arguments are going to have an impact on your ability to go to university. And that can be hard to work out

when such a complicated system comes along with so much jargon! Even the mention of funding sometimes panics some people, because there has been so much publicity about the changes in the way that universities and students are being asked to handle finances.

Essentially, student finance issues fall into one of four categories:

- 1. The money that the government gives to universities in exchange for teaching students.** Universities aren't charities and aren't technically part of the public sector, but most of them aren't private either. There are currently only two private universities in the UK, Buckinghamshire University and the New College of the Humanities in London - but these aren't affected by the financing system discussed in this chapter. If you want to go to one of these universities, then you, or more likely your parents, will have to pay the course fees up front. Universities receive funding from the government based on the numbers of students that they teach.
- 2. The money that the universities charge you to study there.** The government *used* to cover all of the funding for universities (through the arrangement described in the bullet point above) but since 1998, 'top up fees' have been introduced, which are charged to students by universities. However, because the government wants people to go to university (in order to train up the next generation of workers), it has an arrangement with the Student Loans Company* to make large loans to students which will fully cover the money that the university asks you to pay.
- 3. The money you need to live on while studying.** While the Student Loans Company* will loan you the full amount of fees that the university charges you (up to a current cap of £9,000 per year), it will only lend you a certain amount, based on your parents' income, in your Maintenance Grant* - often not enough to cover accommodation, food, travel and other living expenses for most people. And while some students work while studying, many universities discourage it, and a full-time student will very rarely be able to hold down a full-time job - there just aren't enough hours in the day! There are various mechanisms in place to help students with their living expenses while they're studying, but most people end up having to ask their parents for some amount of money or support.

However, you can also subsidise your studies through a part-time job. Listings for these can be found on **Getting-In's** dedicated jobs and internships section.

- 4. The funding available from institutions beside the Student Loans Company*.** There is some funding available from various bodies in the UK for **bursaries*** or **scholarships***. These are sometimes administered by universities, and sometimes offered by charities, corporations, or other organisations. This kind of funding, unlike the funding administered by the Student Loans Company*, varies wildly depending on your own personal

circumstances and on the course that you're on. For a long time, this type of additional funding only applied to a few students; but the 2010 changes following from the Coalition government's Browne Review* include a far greater emphasis on this kind of funding.

Pretty confusing?

Yep.

But every year, thousands of students cope with the student loan system. Although 2011's applicants were the first to deal with the new funding system, more and more information is springing up to help students stay informed about the opportunities available. Most universities are **very open** to queries and requests for guidance from students as they know that the fees and funding system can be very stressful - and that 2011's changes have made it even more confusing. Hopefully, this chapter will help you out, but the fees and finance universe is so vast that it's impossible to include everything here. So there are **plenty of links** to websites and organisations which can give dedicated, personal help to students hopelessly confused by fees.

Student Loans - The Basics and the Changes

Student loans have existed since students started being charged for university degrees, back in 1998. Before that date, all of students' fee costs were covered by the government and by the universities' private funds. Maintenance grants* for living costs were also free of charge and didn't need to be repaid, although they didn't usually cover all of a student's living expenses. At first, student fees were around £1000; however, they tripled in 2005, and tripled again in 2011.

The reasoning behind student fees is that people with graduate degrees will earn more over the course of their lives than those who didn't go to university. So paying students fees is supposed to be seen as **an investment**. Although at the time it seems like a lot of money - students borrowing the maximum amount for fees and maintenance could pay as much as £50,000 for their degrees - most commentators still agree that graduates are likely to earn a graduate 'premium,' based on employers opening better jobs to people with degrees, that comes to more than the loaned sum. (To find rough guidelines for graduate salaries, take a look at **Getting-In's** jobs section, where full-time jobs, part-time jobs and internships are all advertised).

Students take out loans from the government through the Student Loans Company* to pay for both their fees and their day-to-day costs of life such as rent, bills, food, clothes and books. The first type of loan is called a 'tuition fee loan,' while the second is a 'maintenance loan*.'

Students face different problems with these two different kinds of loans. Maintenance loans often don't cover students' living expenses, and so they're left with a shortfall that needs to be topped up by work earnings or parental contributions. Meanwhile, tuition loans **will always cover** the full amount of the tuition fees students are charged by their universities (unless they attend one of the UK's two private universities).

The exact amount you pay will depend on where you live. The Student Loans Company* administers loans for English, Welsh and Northern Irish students through Student Finance England*, Student Finance Wales* and Student Finance Northern Ireland,* and the pricing of these loans is more or less the same; although the Welsh Assembly may contribute to students' fees if they stay within that part of the country. This means that, although officially Welsh students studying in Wales are charged the same amount in tuition fees as English students studying in England, in fact part of the money the government advances to them to cover it will be a grant (a gift) not a loan.

Meanwhile, because Scotland has its own government and greater freedom to do what it likes with its money than Wales or Northern Ireland, the Scottish government doesn't charge students tuition fees: the whole tuition amount is paid for them. But don't get too excited if you're Scottish, or if you're English but would love to head off to St Andrews or Edinburgh - this only applies to Scottish students going to university in Scotland. In fact, because Scottish undergraduate courses take four years to complete rather than three, going to a Scottish university is actually **more expensive** for English students than going to an English university.

For the purposes of fees, grants and loans, where you're 'from' is defined as where you or your parents are currently living: not where you were born or where your family is from.

The system of different tuition fees for students from different parts of the country can be difficult to get straight. The table below is taken from the UCAS website, and shows more clearly how your fees and loans will be decided on.

- **Live in England?** Studying in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland will cost up to £9,000 per year
- **Live in Scotland?** Studying in England, Wales or Northern Ireland will cost up to £9,000 per year, but studying in Scotland is free
- **Live in Wales?** Studying in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland will cost up to £9,000 per year, but the Welsh government will pay anything above £3,465
- **Live in Northern Ireland?** Studying in England, Scotland or Wales will cost up to £9,000 per year, but studying in Northern Ireland will cost £3,465

Case Study: Lawrence, 19, says, 'The lack of tuition fees definitely influenced me to stay in Scotland for my degree attending the University of the Highlands and Islands. But to be honest, like a lot of people at my university, I don't know if I'd have ever gone away from Scotland for uni anyway - before I came to uni I'd never actually left my own island, Shetland! I love the fact that there are people at UHI who I can actually speak Gaelic with. One thing's certain though: I wouldn't have been as comfortable as I am with the university experience if I knew it was getting me into loads of debt. No one in my family even has a credit card. Instead, in a couple of years I'll be a fully qualified Engineer; and I'm aiming to go back to Shetland and try to develop a better system for harnessing all our wind power. At uni, I've got together with some Greenpeace people, and though I'd never met anyone like that before, they're now some of my best friends and their thoughts about oil actually make a lot of sense!'

Besides the question of which part of the country you're from and which part you plan to study in, the main factor in deciding how much money you'll be loaned and how much you'll be given is your family income. If you don't live with your parents, the amount will be judged on the amount that all the adults living in your house earn, together. This is known as **combined household income**. If you live in care, you'll receive the maximum grant and loan package (the 'Under £25, 000' column in the table below) and will also get a bonus bursary* of £2, 000 in your first year.

Your tuition loans will always be the same: the amount that your particular university is charging for your particular course. And the government will always either give you or lend you enough money to cover it through the Student Loans Company*: **you will never have to pay fees upfront**. But the proportion of money that's a grant and money that's a loan will differ depending on your household circumstances. And the amount of money that you're given or loaned for your maintenance (living costs) will also differ - based on the same criteria of the combined household income.

Below is a table, taken from MoneySavingExpert.com, which shows how you'll be financed based on your combined household income. These arrangements apply if during your time at university you will be living apart from your family, and studying outside of London. If you live at home, you won't be entitled to maintenance grants, and if you're studying in London, you will get slightly more money, whether that's in a loan or a grant, to reflect the extra cost of living in London, which has the highest rents in the UK.

- **Household income under £25,000:** You will receive £3,250 in non-repayable maintenance grants, and £3,875 in repayable maintenance loans. **Total: £7,125.**
- **Household income between £25,000 and £30,000:** You will receive £2,341 in non-repayable maintenance grants, and £4,330 in repayable maintenance loans. **Total: £6,671.**

- **Household income between £30,000 and £35,000:** You will receive £1,432 in non-repayable maintenance grants, and £4,784 in repayable maintenance loans. **Total: £6,216.**
- **Household income between £35,000 and £40,000:** You will receive £523 in non-repayable maintenance grants, and £5,239 in repayable maintenance loans. **Total: £5,762.**
- **Household income between £40,000 and £45,000:** You will receive **£5,288** in repayable maintenance loans.
- **Household income between £45,000 and £50,000:** You will receive **£4,788** in repayable maintenance loans.
- **Household income between £50,000 and £55,000:** You will receive **£4,288** in repayable maintenance loans.
- **Household income between £55,000 and £60,000:** You will receive **£3,788** in repayable maintenance loans.
- **Household income over £60,000:** You will receive **£3,575** in repayable maintenance loans.

More precise guidance for your individual situation can be found online at the student finance calculator at

www.studentfinance.direct.gov.uk/portal/page?_pageid=153,4680136&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL. This allows you to enter the exact data about your family's finances and other parts of your situation, and get back a precise amount. The student finance calculator is very useful to use in advance of your application, but it does mean that you'll have to talk frankly and honestly to your family about their finances.

Many sixth-form students find this hard to do: you'll need to know the exact amount that any adult living in your household earns, and your parents will have to fill in a long form. If your parents don't live together, you'll also have to ask for details of any child support. The British are known to dislike talking about money, and so these conversations can be difficult. But it's **very important** that you're aware of how much loan and grant money you'll be receiving. Your parents will also **have to share these details** with the Student Loan Company* through your regional organiser (Student Finance England, Student Finance Wales or Student Finance Northern Ireland). When you register for student loans or grants, a box will appear asking if you and your parents give consent for your/their financial details to be shared. **Make sure that you tick 'Yes.'** 'Shared' doesn't mean that the details will become publicly available, and will never be given to anyone for a purpose other than calculating your student finance arrangements. It just means that UCAS can pass it on to Student Finance England, Wales or Northern Ireland, who will pass it on to the Student Loans Company.

Of course, for many people the loan and grant maintenance money **doesn't cover** expenses. As a student, you'll be living frugally in a single room, but costs can still mount up. The reason why the amount of loan and grant money goes up or down depending on your family income is that the

system expects your family to **fill in the shortfall**. Although many people think of university as the opportunity to cut loose from their families, the financial reality is very different. Unless your family earns less than £25,000, or you're prepared to work very hard at a job while studying - which could well harm your grades - your family will have to give you some cash during your uni years.

This means that when you know you're going to university, you need to sit down with your parents, or whoever's been responsible for financially supporting you up to this point, and have a **serious talk about money**.

You can seem **grown-up and responsible** during this talk by having a rough idea for a budget ready. Below is a table showing what a basic student budget of expenditure might look like.

You need an idea of how much money your parents will be able to give you in order to create an organised budget for university, and to avoid worrying about money during your time there. It's best if this is given to you as a **regular stipend paid directly into your bank account**, rather than the odd cheque in the post when your mum's feeling generous, as you'll only be able to properly plan your expenditure when you know how much your income will be.

Although children often don't see it, few parents will be new to household budgeting. They may well even have done some thinking in advance as to how they're going to afford to support you.

But What About Student Loans?

While you're talking to your parents about your maintenance arrangements, they may well bring up the cost of your student loans. Student loans now stand at an enormous amount, and some parents feel that they out to be 'helping out' their kids with those as well as with maintenance. A lot of the talk about the fee rise following the Browne Review* has focussed on the massive expense that the increase represents to families.

The increase in fees has put some people off going to university altogether, although others simply use resources such as **Getting-In's** jobs and internships listings to find employment which stops them getting into too much debt. **Interestingly**, the fee hike has also led to an increase in students opting for higher education colleges rather than universities, even if they want to study academic subjects. Many of these colleges offer the possibility of studying for three years at £3,000 per year and receiving a degree at the end from an affiliated university whose students pay £9,000 per year. This situation is tense, with some universities demanding that colleges affiliated with them charge higher fees in order to stop competing for students, but Universities Minister David Willetts encouraging the colleges to offer the cheaper degrees. It will be interesting to see how this situation develops.

Case Study: Joe, 35, says: 'When I started my degree 'first time around,' in 1995, I didn't have to pay any student fees at all - but when my girlfriend got pregnant with my son Luke during my first year, we both dropped out in order to work and provide for our family. We were a bit young to manage our own money though, and unfortunately got into a credit card debt. We're out of the woods now, but it's made me leery of going into more debt. However, I'd always wanted to finish my degree; and a proper qualification would mean that I'd get a lot more freelance computing work - so when I found an HE college near me that offered degrees for just £4,000 per year I was really glad! I'm doing the course over four years part-time, but even so it should be fairly easy to pay off, borrowing £2,000 per year from the Student Loans Company and making up the rest ourselves. Luke thinks it's great - but as he's 16 now and starting to think about UCAS, he's a bit annoyed that I'm 'going off to uni' before him!'*

But there is a **network of silver lining** that means this expense shouldn't be *too taxing* - as in fact, there's not much need for your parents to pay your fees upfront.

The full amount of student fees is always loaned to students by the government through the Student Loans Company,* and this kind of loan is quite unique. Your parents will be worried - and rightly so - about you getting into potentially £50,000 of debt, and it's true that the amount is so high that most people are not expected to ever pay it back. **But** there are many features of loans from the Student Loan Company* that make them **different from any other kind of debt:**

- **You don't have to pay it back** until you're earning over £21,000 per year, and then the amount you pay back is tied to your income. You pay 9% of all your income **over £21,000**. So, for instance, if you're earning £22,000, you'll pay the Student Loans Company 9% of £1,000: £90 per year. More information about repayments can be found in the table on page 133.
- If your income goes down, **so do your repayments**. You don't have to pay anything if you're earning **less than £21,000** per year. As soon as you stop earning that amount, you stop having to pay the Student Loans Company* anything. While you're not paying it, it does accumulate **interest** - but you're not charged non-payment fees or any of the other penalties which you get for not paying back a bank or credit card loan.
- **It disappears after 30 years**. If you haven't paid off your loans 30 years after you graduate - and many people won't have done - then your debt is simply cancelled. So if you never earn enough to pay it back, you'll still be able to retire without having to put all your funds into student loan repayments, and no-one else will be liable for them on your behalf.
- **It doesn't affect credit ratings**. Having large amounts of unpaid debt usually means trouble. Records of your debt are kept on a centralised database, called your 'credit score,' and can be easily accessed by banks or other lenders - so it's no wonder that many

people are worried that owing so much money will cause them problems getting a mortgage or other loan in the future. However, student loans **do not go on credit files**, and so they're not visible to these lenders. In some cases (especially when you apply for a mortgage), lenders do ask you to fill out a special application form about your finances - and this may ask questions about student loans. But when MoneySavingExpert.com asked about this on behalf of the Independent Taskforce of Student Finance Information*, the Council for Mortgage Lenders said, 'A student loan is very unlikely to impact materially on an individual's ability to get a mortgage.'

There used to be another difference between student loans and normal 'consumer' loans from a bank or building society: until 2011, the interest on student loans was **pegged to inflation** (known as RPI*). This meant that the only way the amount increased over the years was in order to negate the way that the value of *money itself* decreases. However, the Browne Review* stopped this, and now a rate of interest - small compared to that charged on a credit card, but still above inflation - *is* charged on student loans.

Meanwhile, you can use the table below (taken from MoneySavingExpert.com) to compare repayment plans under the pre-2011 system and the system implemented following the Browne Review*. Remember that the main differences are:

- **Interest is now charged** after a certain amount of time has passed.
- **The loan is higher**, reflecting fees of up to £9, 000
- **Repayment comes later**: you don't have to start paying the loan back until you're earning over £21,000 per year, as opposed to the old system when you started repayments when your earnings hit £15,000.

Repayments: Pre-2011 system

- If you earn under **£16,000** per year, you don't have to repay anything
- If you earn more than **£16,000** per year, you have to repay **£90** per year
- If you earn more than **£21,000** per year, you have to repay **£540** per year
- If you earn more than **£22,000** per year, you have to repay **£630** per year
- If you earn more than **£30,000** per year, you have to repay **£1,350** per year
- If you earn more than **£40,000** per year, you have to repay **£2,250** per year
- If you earn more than **£50,000** per year, you have to repay **£3,150** per year

Repayments: Post-Browne Review system

- If you earn less than **£22,000** per year, you don't have to repay anything

- If you earn more than **£22,000** per year, you have to repay **£90** per year
- If you earn more than **£30,000** per year, you have to repay **£810** per year
- If you earn more than **£40,000** per year, you have to repay **£1,710** per year
- If you earn more than **£50,000** per year, you have to repay **£2,610** per year

Of course, although the post-Browne payments are less, they will take longer to pay off.

Because leaving the fee-paying up to the Student Loan Company*, and repayment to them up to the student, will result in interest accumulating, it is now cheaper to pay the fees upfront. But this is only really feasible if either you or your parents has a very large stockpile of cash - and if your parents don't mind paying for your degree for you. When such a big sum is involved, most parents conclude that their child can just pay it back gradually!

The facts given in the bullet points above should show that although the sums of money which you borrow to go to university will probably be larger figures than you've ever dealt with before, that **isn't a reason not to do a degree.**

Already, many commentators are saying that the biggest factor putting sixth-form students from difficult backgrounds off applying to university is **fear** of the fees, rather than the actual impact that the fees will have on their lives. This is why the Independent Taskforce on Student Financial Information* was established - to educate prospective students about the difference between student loan debt and mainstream credit debt. The Taskforce is (as the name suggests!) independent, not for-profit, and has great free resources designed to discuss student fees with parents (at www.moneysavingexpert.com/students/student-finance) and prospective students (at www.moneysavingexpert.com/students/student-loans-tuition-fees-changes).

And despite the dramatic headlines, there is *one* thing that hasn't changed.

Applying to the Student Loans Company* for funding works in the same way that it has since student fees were introduced in 1998, so your teachers, careers advisors (and if you have older siblings who went to university, your parents) will be familiar with it. And it's a relatively straightforward process.

How To Register and Access Student Finance

You register to receive the loan to cover your fees when you first register with UCAS. As you may remember from page 69 of 'Chapter Four: Navigating the Application Process,' UCAS will ask you the name of your Local Education Authority,* and a couple of other money-related questions, when

you first log on to Track. This information is passed to Student Finance*, calling their attention to the fact that you might well be needing a loan or grant!

For 'normal' loans from a bank or building society, you'll usually have to have a detailed plan of how you're going to spend the money (on buying a house or starting a business) before you approach the bank manager. But student fees are completely different. UCAS and the Student Loans Company* both encourage students to apply for their fee loans **as soon as possible**, through the UCAS Track form. You don't need to wait until you know which course you'll be doing or which university you'll be attending, because no university (apart from Buckinghamshire University and the New College of the Humanities) will charge more in fees than the Student Loans Company* is prepared to cover.

And if you register for finance early on, and then don't get a place or decide not to go to university, the Student Loans Company* won't complain: registering with them is **not** the same as signing a contract with your Firm choice of university on Track. In fact, there is a recommended deadline of the 31st May for registering for student loans and grants. Although you **can** submit an application at any time until **nine months after** the beginning of the academic year, the Student Loans Company* warns that if you register with them after 31st May when your course starts in September, you won't get the money **in time for the beginning of the course**. And on 31st of May, of course, nobody's choices are confirmed, because exam results aren't out yet!

At any point after you've registered, you can go to www.studentfinance.direct.gov.uk and officially request student loans and grants. When you apply, you'll be asked for your parents' National Insurance numbers (or, if you don't live with them, the numbers of whoever the adults in your household are), and Student Finance* will check up with the tax office (HMRC, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) to confirm that you've given them the correct information about your household income. Financial evidence may be requested to support the application (although this is fairly rare), and you can send photo-copies of your parents' wage slips, tax forms, bank statements or whatever else you're asked for. You'll also be asked for your passport number: this is to prove your identity (as otherwise anybody pretending to be you could apply for debt in your name) and to check that you have the right to receive governmental support in the UK.

You'll also choose **how much you want to borrow**. Although most people go for the full amount that they're entitled to, there's nothing wrong with only asking for what you need, if you have strong parental help or other sources of funding available. And remember that by using special student resources, such as the student deals available on www.Getting-in.com, or Getting-In's classified buy-and-sell app for used items, you can make your money stretch a lot further.

Case Study: Pauline, 24, says, 'My Nan's never been rich, but because she worked in the public sector for decades, she's got a very good pension. But she doesn't get out of the house much since she came to live with my Mum, and though Mum takes some money from her for food and board, she won't accept my Nan giving her lots of the pension as she says that's her money. So my Nan decided to give it to me instead (!) She thought it was awful how much money I was going to borrow from the Government when she saw me starting to fill out by Student Loans Company form (although the fees were only about £3,500 a year at the time). When she realised that her pension had had an impact on me being refused a grant - my Mum's a single mother, but Student Finance England* counts my Nan's pension as she's part of my household - she said 'I'll pay your fees then.' And she did! Now, unlike some of the other people I graduated with, I don't have to worry about repayment money being taken off my pay cheque!'*

When the Student Loans Company* have processed your request, they'll send you a Student Finance Entitlement letter, showing how much you've been awarded. For people who apply online (increasingly, the majority of new students), there'll also be a formal declaration form. This is for you to provide your signature, in order to validate the information: you'll return it to Student Finance England*, Student Finance Wales* or Student Finance Northern Ireland*, depending on where you live.

Whether you apply online or by post, you **must save the Student Finance Entitlement letter** and bring it to your university registration along with your other official letters. When you register at the university (usually in the first week of term), the Student Loans Company will be notified and will send the tuition fee loan directly to the university, and the maintenance loan or grant straight into your bank account.

Student Finance* and the Student Loans Company* will use words like 'application,' 'decision' and 'award' when discussing the process of registering for loans or grants, which lead some people to think that it is competitive. **Government-provided student finance is not competitive.** If you are accepted by a university onto a course, and you are a British national or permanent resident, then you're **definitely entitled** to loans to cover your fees and to certain amount of maintenance grant (more about this in the table on page 130).

So you don't need to worry very much about your finance application.

However, if you think a **mistake has been made** in assessing you (the Student Loans Company* have got your financial details wrong, have done their maths wrong, or another mistake), then there is an appeals process which is relatively simple. The Student Loans Company have got into trouble for making too many mistakes before - so if there seems to be a problem, don't assume that it must be your mistake. Call and ask them about it. If you want to get the most out of the organisation you

should know exactly what you're **entitled** to, and feel comfortable about making a fuss if it isn't delivered.

The same applies to universities which may confuse you with the details of their fee arrangements. Hopefully, by the time you're applying for 2013 entry, universities will have settled down and have more definite pricing. But in December 2011, thousands of aspiring students who were close to sending off final applications for the 19th January deadline were left confused and wondering if they'd made the right choice, after 24 universities and one college (one-fifth of the UK's higher educational institutions in total) lowered their fees to less than £7,500. Universities which suddenly dropped their fees included:

- London South Bank University
- University of Aston
- Nottingham Trent University
- St Mary's University
- Teesside University
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Cumbria
- Southampton Solent University
- University of Chester
- University of Chichester
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Huddersfield
- Leeds Trinity University
- University of West London.

Why did they do this?

The government had just released a 'white paper' declaring that **only institutions which charge less than £7,500** would be eligible to bid for 20,000 extra student places on their courses - and of course, all of the associated funding.

Now, many of the different universities charge different fees - and even more confusingly, some universities charge different fees for different courses. This is partly because some courses cost more to run (for instance, a Medical degree with the price of fully-equipped laboratories, human dissection subjects and a full-time-job week of contact time with professors, costs more than a History course which only needs a free classroom and maybe an overhead projector for seminar and lectures!) If it's not immediately clear to you how much you'll be expected to pay in tuition fees for your chosen course, then you should **check with the department immediately**.

But in these very changeable times just checking out the situation once, while you're considering whether or not apply, **isn't really enough**. Although I'm very keen on 'just ask' as advice for how to find out about specific things at most institutions, this policy is slightly different in the realms of finance, fees and funding. Because universities may well change funding arrangements at almost any time, you will have to **check and double check** if you're applying in the next couple of years.

Of course, the simple fact that universities **can** change their fees by thousands of pounds so late in the application process, and that very few students seem to have changed their minds about which university to attend following the December 2011 fee drop by certain institutions, wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for the very remote way that student finance applications are processed.

On page 132 above I've explained how student fees aren't like typical debts - the final difference is that the payment of the student fees is done completely between the Student Loans Company and the university. The money goes **directly into the universities' funds** without ever passing through your bank account! If you change university near to the beginning of term due to entering Clearing or Adjustment, Student Finance will automatically know about it. And if your university changes the fees it's going to charge, like the universities which made a change in December 2011, Student Finance will know about it and will adjust the amount you're borrowing accordingly.

Funding

In addition to the government's standard student loans and grants, there is **funding** available from various organisations which students can use to either reduce the amount they need to borrow for tuition fees, or contribute towards their living expenses. Broadly speaking, this funding comes from one of three sources

- **From government and government-funded organisations.**
- **From the student's university or higher education college.**
- **From an external organisation not directly involved in the student's education, such as a charity or a corporation.**

The first group of funding resources - those obtained from the government - is exclusively for those already entitled to some governmental benefits. These resources aren't designed to reward very good students; they're designed to ensure that any student who's starting at a disadvantage is compensated, with the aim of levelling the playing field. The most common 'extra' governmental funding is the DSA* (Disabled Students' Allowance), which helps to pay for resources that a disabled student may need to complete his or her degree. For example, DSA* could be used to pay for a scribe or voice recognition software for speech-impaired students, a 'helper' to help a student with

limited mobility get through classes, or Braille or audio copies of course books for blind students. To buy and sell these books, check out **Getting-In's** classified app for buying and selling student items.

You apply for DSA* **as soon as possible**, when you first register with Student Finance* - there's a space on the registration form for you to tick if you think you'll be entitled to DSA. Then, you'll go to

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/EducationAndTraining/HigherEducation/DG_10034900, to complete a DSA1 form. You'll be asked to give proof of your disability, such as a letter from your doctor. For some learning difficulties (the most common is dyslexia), you'll have to send a report **compiled after you turned 16** by an officially-qualified psychologist, or a teacher who has an Assessment Practising Certificate.

The amount of DSA depends almost completely on the amount of help that you'll need: it varies wildly, from a couple of hundred pounds for transcription software to provision of full-time staff to help you get between classes and to carry your books. Student Finance will work out how much you'll need by assessing you at an independent 'assessment centre.' This isn't a test as such: it's just a way of seeing first-hand how much help you're likely to need.

The government also offers funding for students who have children of their own (**Childcare Grants** and **Parent Support Grants**) and one-off support payments for people leaving local authority care (a children's home or foster parent) to go to university.

Next comes **funding from universities and higher education colleges**.

Following the fees rise, this type of funding is **much more common than it used to be**.

This is because universities are **only allowed to charge more than £6,000 per year** if they make provision through bursaries*, scholarships* and fee waivers* for students from less traditional backgrounds (*i.e.*, students with little family history of going to university, from low-income families, and/or from schools where going to university is quite rare).

As a result, the **National Scholarship Programme*** has been created, in order to give students extra help in addition to the funding assistance already offered by some colleges and universities. Each university or higher education college manages its own individual NSP*, and the funds are usually available for students whose households earn less than £25,000. However, many universities also have scholarships available to the brightest students, regardless of family background. Universities including Leicester, Queen Mary and Oxford Brookes all have up to £3,000 per year available to triple-A students who do well across the board at A-Level. To make sure that you're eligible for

these scholarships, use **Getting-In's** special exam preparation section for past papers for A-Levels and GCSEs.

Universities have always had some funding available for students who either **come from disadvantaged backgrounds**, or who **do very well at their studies**. This money comes from the universities' own private funds. Some of it is bound by law to be spent on specific purposes, such as money left in somebody's Will to be used for something special: for instance, giving money to a Classics student to visit Greece or Rome, or giving help to a student of the same ethnic background as the donor (these arrangements are more common at older universities, as they have had more time to build up a list of rich alumni who have left them money). However, some of it comes from funds controlled completely by the university - gathered by them as rent or other returns on investments, or by hosting conferences or events. Because of concerns that cuts to university funding by the government would lead to institutions 'dipping in' to the funding usually reserved for helping students, the government insisted when allowing universities to charge higher fees that they **must** show that they have sufficient help available for anybody bright enough to get an offer to go there.

Funds given to students by their universities are known as either **scholarships*** or **bursaries***. The traditional difference between these terms, explained in **Inset Eight**, is still upheld by Student Finance England*, Wales* and Northern Ireland*, but is increasingly being blurred. But whatever your university *calls* the funds it has available, the two ways of getting your hands on them remain the same: through coming from a disadvantaged or difficult background, or through doing very well at your studies.

There is a third type of financial assistance besides bursaries* and scholarships* called 'fee waivers**' - this means that the university will reduce or remove your need to pay fees. Eligibility for fee waivers* sometimes depends on your background, and sometimes on your academic excellence, depending on your university. However, fee waivers* have attracted a lot of criticism. As I've explained above, fees are a cost that many students won't end up paying back, and most will only return the money very slowly, at a rate of a few hundred pounds per year. By contrast, living costs such as rent or Tesco bills have to be met immediately! The government has been criticised for encouraging fee waivers*, with NUS* President Liam Burns calling the waiver system a 'con trick,' and saying "Fee waivers help the Treasury, who have to spend less on loans, but are of no benefit to students whatsoever." This is because they involve the Student Loans Company* having to provide a smaller amount of upfront money to universities.

Unlike Student Loans Company* funding, applying for funding from your university has to wait until you know for sure which one you'll be attending: no university will process applications before this

time. However, the gap between Results Day in mid-August and starting the course in September doesn't give you very long to think of alternative arrangements if your application isn't successful.

That's why you should be **thinking about finance from the beginning of your university choices.**

If you know that your family or the maintenance loans or grants* from the government will be able to completely cover your costs, then it doesn't make a lot of sense to make the amount of fees help available into a central part of your university choice. Instead, you should go with the **course you love at the best university for you.** This is because you'll get better grades in a course you love, and attract better employment prospects at a better university - meaning you're able to pay your fees back more quickly anyway.

However, because of the recession many prospective students are stuck 'in the middle' of the people with very comfortably-off parents who can support them, and the people with disadvantaged family backgrounds who get the full loan and grant package available from the government. The most common recession problem is that a student's parents may earn too much for them to qualify for very much in grants or loans for maintenance, but have their earnings wrapped up in mortgages or other expenses which they committed to when they were earning more - meaning that there's no spare money, or very little, lying around to support a child over 18. If you are in this situation or one similar to it, it may well be worth asking universities **at open days, or by e-mail** when you're first considering applying, what financial support provision they have available. **Don't be embarrassed** - this is what that money's there for.

Interestingly, this is an area in which going to an Oxford or Cambridge college may well be beneficial. Because these colleges are so old, they have had plenty of time to build up revenue - and are, in fact, some of the largest landowners in the world.

For example: a very rich lady in the 1300s left her whole collection of jewels to Christ's College, Cambridge when she died. As an afterthought, she also left a few run-down farms in the north of England to St John's College. But now St John's is far richer than Christ's. **Why?** One of the reasons is that the land that lady left to St John's developed into Manchester: now one of the UK's biggest cities, and commanding rents worth hundreds of millions.

In addition, the college system means that many students receive multiple bursaries* - some from the universities, some from the departments, and some from the colleges. There's also often a system for monetarily rewarding students who get Firsts, and various funds available for things like travel or books. However, you may have to do some work to uncover these funds: some of which are so strange or specific that they don't get awarded in many years. When you have the cash in

your pocket, you can use **Getting-In's** classified app to buy student-related items such as books second-hand, or access the site's cheap deals section for bargains!

Case Study: Udi, 24, says, 'My older brother and I are from a pretty average family in Leeds and don't have loads of money, but we both got into Cambridge and found ourselves really "rich" during our time there! Because he went there before me, he'd already sussed out all the funding opportunities, and told me about them. Because I received the full governmental Maintenance Grant, I was also eligible for a bursary* of more than £3 000 from the university - and a second bursary* of £2 000 from my college. I got Firsts during my time there, which were rewarded each year with a couple of hundred pounds, and was also sponsored by money from a rich alumnus allowing £1,000 per year for students whose fathers had been chemists - which mine was for a while back in Pakistan. I did Natural Sciences, and spent the summer between second and third year in the Galapagos islands in South America, studying the giant tortoises - paid for by my department! Between first and second year I was in India with a grant left by an alumnus to students travelling 'within the sub-continent.' Plus, I can eat gourmet three course meals for less than a tenner in Hall. It's been great fun!'*

Now, with the National Scholarship Programme* and a general greater emphasis on university subsidies, newer universities are far more likely to have bursaries*, scholarships* and fee waivers* available than they did in the past. So whichever university you're applying to, **be proactive** about finding out about the funds you could obtain. There's some easily searchable information about the different scholarships* at different universities available at online resources including:

- <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/StudentFinance/StudentfinanceA-Z/index.htm> (the official government list of funding available through universities, including most of the NSP* provision)
- <http://www.family-action.org.uk/section.aspx?id=1037> (the Educational Grants Advisory Service, EGAS*)
- www.unigrants.co.uk
- www.studentcashpoint.co.uk
- www.turn2us.org.uk
- www.scholarship-search.org.uk/grants/undergraduate-scholarship

There are **two things to remember** when using these websites to search for financial resources.

The first is that the results they bring up are **not exclusive**. Even the DirectGov* site only lists fairly **new** funding opportunities: many of the funds Udi took advantage of in the case study above wouldn't have been listed there. So don't assume that because you can't see anything listed for your course, there aren't funds available.

Secondly, not all of the results returned by these searches are grants administered by universities. They combine university awards with awards from **third-party organisations**.

This is also an important sector for funding opportunities.

Many students are funded by organisations, charities or corporations which may offer any amount of help, from covering their costs completely to providing £50 or £100 for books. (Remember, this amount will stretch a lot further if you use **Getting-In's** deal section or specialised classified buy-and-sell app to make your purchases).

The most commonly known providers of funding for undergraduate degrees are the NHS and the armed forces. Both of these organisations fund degrees as part of a long-term recruitment process, dedicated to attracting as many talented young people as possible.

If you're training for a medical or medicine-related degree, or for social work, you may be eligible for a £1,000 yearly bursary* from the NHS. Have a look at <http://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/Students/816.aspx> to find out if this could apply to you.

The Army, Navy and Air Force all also provide amounts of funding for students which vary depending on the student's university, subject and financial situation. Some information can be found at <http://www.hmforces.co.uk/education/articles/25-money-for-education-prior-to-joining-the-armed-forces>. **However**, it's extremely important to remember that signing up to join the armed forces during your degree is a **firm commitment** to serve in the armed forces once you graduate. Joining the armed forces is **more than a contract**: it binds you under the army's own law. If you *graduate* with a degree the armed forces have paid for and then don't want to start work with them, they *could* in the worst case scenario exercise their legal right to **imprison you as a deserter!** So only use the armed forces for funding if you're very certain about committing to that career for at least a few years after graduation.

Some corporations also sponsor degrees through scholarship* programmes. Some of these programmes 'come with' a contractual obligation to work for the company after graduation, and some don't. **Make sure you know the details** before you sign up! The degrees sponsored will be in subjects relevant to the company's work: e.g., BP (British Petroleum) might sponsor a Chemistry or Engineering degree, while Tesco or ASDA might sponsor Business Studies. This *does* mean that you have a **better chance of funding** if you do a subject which typically leads to a well-paid career.

There are also a whole host of charities, NGOs and not-for-profit organisations which help students with their degrees, based on a range of different criteria. These can be found on the search sites

listed in the bullet points above - or by just poking around the internet or your local library's reference section, if you have one.

A sample of these various opportunities includes:

- The **Nuffield Foundation's** bursaries* for science research
- The **Society for Promoting the Training of Women's** loans for women training for professional, commercial or technical work
- The **George Viner Memorial Trust**, established by the National Union of Journalists to give financial support to journalism students of black or Asian descent
- The **Leverhulme Trade Charities Trust** for students connected to commercial travellers, chemists or grocers, through their families or the subject of their studies
- The **Royal Caledonian Schools Trust**, offering help to students whose parents are Scottish, and have either served in the armed forces or are living in London

As you can see, the range is amazing!

However, most of these awards aren't available to apply for until you've actually started university, and are mostly available at any university. For this reason, I won't go into great detail about them here, as the point of this guide is to help you **choose the right course for you** and to **get in**.

Good Luck!

At the end of this guide, I hope you've found the answers to some questions, and some useful links to more information. The path to **choosing and getting into the right course for you** will always be complicated, but it can also be a lot of fun. When you look at all the different possibilities available to you through the minimal UCAS website, it's hard not to feel **excited** - even if you're nervous as well.

Here's some final advice about the process of seeking information and guidance when you're applying to university. Remember that independent research and advice from teachers are best when they are used **in tandem** to complement each other. Teachers have a lot of first-hand information and it's **important to keep them informed**, right from the start of your A-Levels, about what you might want to do at university. Most sixth-form colleges and schools will have a **tutor or careers tutor**, as opposed to your subject teacher, with whom you can discuss these things. It's important to keep someone at school informed in case you decide on a degree that needs preparation from them: for instance, if you apply to Oxford or Cambridge, you'll need your reference before the 15th October - pretty soon after the beginning of term for a teacher who didn't even know you were applying to get done. And if you apply to one of the courses listed in Table One in **Inset Seven** (page 115), you'll need your school to help you register for the extra test.

Meanwhile, although teachers are invaluable, they don't always have the most up-to-date information. The internet-savvy generation applying to uni in 2012 has instant help at their fingertips - whether that's official information from sites like **DirectGov** or online university prospectuses, or friendly personal advice from **Getting-In**. Combining these two types of knowledge can help you to make a well-informed choice which will **kick-start you** on your journey into **life beyond school**.

Even in the process of applying, you'll come into contact with all kinds of indications about life at university, and the ways in which it's sure to **expand your horizons** and develop your **thoughts and opinions**. At **Open Days**, you'll talk to experienced and very intelligent professors who will illuminate your chosen subject perhaps further than your sixth-form teachers can. While speaking to **other applicants and current students** at Open Days or on internet forums, you'll meet a wide range of people, just as diverse as the eclectic mix of 'freshers' thrown together in *Fresh Meat*. Don't get angry or upset if you're challenged: prospective students can learn a lot from each other by pooling application advice and debating. And, of course, if you use **Getting-In** you'll come into contact with educated and inspiring advisors while working on your **personal statement**.

Although many find the process of applying to university intimidating and confusing, it's also thrilling. I hope that this book has helped you with background knowledge, and more precise information when necessary, and that you feel prepared for the application process.

Remember what the end goal is: to spend three or four years learning about the thing you love the most, being taught by experts, in the company of thousands of young people from all over the world and with all kinds of different interests. Pretty cool - so when you find the university place you're looking for, be proud of yourself. You've earned it.

Have fun!

Product description

A University Guide: Choosing A Course and Getting In is produced by the team behind popular university applications advice website **Getting-In.com**. This website provides tailored personal statement help and advice for young people applying to university. Now, this non-fiction guide takes students through the process of applying to UK universities using the UCAS system and making sure that they get the places that they want. This book includes:

- up-to-date league tables and other statistics
- explanations of common terms and jargon used by university admissions departments
- an examination of why people go to university
- the right criteria for choosing a subject, institution and degree
- specialist interview advice for medical degrees, Oxford and Cambridge colleges, and other courses you're likely to need an interview for
- a guide to non-A level examinations required by some university courses, and how to cope with these extra requirements
- a step-by-step guide through and timetable of the UCAS process
- detailed advice on writing a winning personal statement, supported by years of experience from the Getting-In team
- an explanation of the changes to student finance made in 2011, and how to use them to your best advantage
- a guide to the Clearing and Adjustment systems used for students whose grades aren't what they expect
- a history of universities and their development in the UK

Written in clear language that any seventeen-year-old can easily understand, this book also caters for mature and gap-year students. Although Getting-In runs its own successful advice website, a selection of other online and offline resources are also included here so that students can get the most extensive and accurate advice possible.

A University Guide: Choosing A Course and Getting In is designed to allow students the opportunity to consider every angle before making decisions that could shape the rest of their lives. It offers not only practical advice, but also detailed guidance and counselling on how to choose a subject and a university, taking into account your ambitions, priorities, best-loved subjects and personal habits.

www.getting-in.com

ISBN 978-1-908886-00-2



0 781908 886002 >