
Exploring your Future Pathway

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 1**

Karina

Welcome to *Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni* podcast. My name is Karina and I am a collaborative outreach assistant at the University of Essex and I work closely with our *Aspire* and *Aspire Higher* programs.

Katie

And my name is Katie and I work for the Outreach team as well. If you have any questions about any topics we discuss, please use the hashtag #UnderstandingUni on Twitter, or you can email outreach@essex.ac.uk.

There are hundreds of thousands of different jobs out there, and no wonder students get so overwhelmed when they're choosing their options after school or college.

It can just seem so daunting, and I think some students sometimes feel like when they're picking their GCSE options or picking the subjects they're going to do at college that they feel like they're trapped, and that's what they're going to do for the rest of their lives.

And actually, that's not sometimes the case, and it's something we're going to talk about today.

Karina

Oh yeah, definitely. So, to sort of give our listeners an insight into the different pathways, we'll be discussing our experiences, the potential pathways that someone could take, and speaking about others' experiences as well, and the pathways that they took.

We really do hope that this episode will help our listeners to feel more inspired and motivated, and provide some useful tips for ways to think about, and how to explore, your future. So, coming from my own personal experience, I came out of secondary school with mainly B's and C's for my GCSEs and then went off to sixth form, where I studied Drama, English Language and Media for my A-levels.

I decided to apply to Drama as I was very, very passionate and I'd done well in school and sixth form, so obviously it was the right decision to make for university, or so I thought.

It was something that was within my comfort zone, so I do feel like that was one of the reasons why I chose it.

On my A-level results day I actually ended up getting the grades that I needed and I was accepted onto the course. But I remember calling them up and asking to see if there's any spaces left through Clearing for a criminology degree, because I'd spent all summer

thinking about just trying something new and going out there and sort of using my hobbies and interests as something to guide me, rather than just sticking to something safe.

So I did actually switch out my course to BA Criminology and I ended up graduating with a 2:1 in 2019.

I definitely really, really enjoyed it. I enjoyed studying something that I'd never studied before, as well.

And I feel like something that comes up quite a lot with students sort of choosing a new course that they've never looked into before is the sort of fear behind not knowing what is to come.

I will say that sometimes, yeah, I did feel like I was behind, because, as soon as they had mentioned any sort of theorists or anything I'd be like: who on earth is that?

But lecturers and professors never ever sort of left you behind, they'd always go over stuff again and provide additional resources in case you wanted to look into it.

But I still remember one of my first lectures, they mentioned one of the theorists and everyone in that class nodded their heads, like yeah I know this person.

And I was just like, no, and so we're a few other people, so the lecturer just sort of went over it, spoke about it, and the rest of the class really did help too, the other students out.

So it's definitely the best decision I made. What was your experience like, Katie?

Katie

So mine was a little bit different but it's really interesting actually because, you'd obviously changed your mind, and I think, for me, I did change my mind a lot, actually. I had a gap year after sixth form, so I did my GCSEs and I'd always been a very keen dancer and performer, so that that was sort of going on alongside my GCSEs, and when I went to sixth form I sort of balanced my subjects out and did Art History, English... And then I had my performing arts and my drama subjects as well, so it's doing a bit of both and trying to work out what it was that I really wanted to do.

But I think I still deep down, I really was like, I really want to try this performing, I really want to see what it would be like to be a performer. So I applied for a lot of musical theatre conservatoires and I went to a load of the auditions, which was brilliant, because it made me realize that was what I didn't want to do.

So that was one big bit of advice, really: try it. Try something, and it will make you realize maybe that you do or don't want to do it.

So from those auditions I was like, no this isn't for me, I do love performing but maybe it's more of a hobby for me and something that I can pursue alongside what I want to do.

I did have a gap year, partly because I wasn't sure, but also because I just wanted some time off from studying. I worked quite a few jobs, I think I had about four jobs, all really fun things.

One was working at festivals making milkshakes and it was one of the best experiences, and I've learned so much from it and I'm still using some of the skills I learned then in stuff I do now, so those things I did in my gap year are obviously so important.

And then, through my gap year I then decided that I would study a performance-related course at university, partly because I really wanted to learn more. I wanted to know more about performance studies, and so my course actually was a Bachelor of Arts in Performance Studies,

And yeah, I had that whole year in my gap year to prepare for it, and it wasn't a particularly practical-based course because again, like when I was in sixth form, I wanted to do a bit of theory and a bit of practical, and I think there is a big issue with students doing those practical courses: they assume it's going to be very practical, and it wasn't, and a lot of people dropped out within the first few weeks and months—thinking that they were going to be doing dancing and singing and it wasn't that at all—but I had a really great time, came out with a first class degree, which was incredible. I was very, very proud.

And yeah, that was my university journey and obviously from then I've had a few jobs within education which, strangely, does not directly link to my degree, but both Karina and I obviously don't currently work in our degree areas and we'll obviously talk about that a bit more.

Karina

Yeah.

Katie

But yeah, very, very different pathways.

Karina

I think you raised a really good point earlier as well, about sort of being quite confused about the choice that you wanted to make. And I feel like during my A-levels, I really, really was all over the place, and I feel like the strongest part hit *after* I actually applied to

university and made my final decision, like there were points when I was going through the A-level exam season, I was like: what if I want to do architecture? And I remember looking into it, but it was like, oh, you need portfolios and stuff and I was like, yeah, I don't have any of that.

But I feel like that's why I sort of wish somebody told me when I was in like year 11, year 12 to just go online, just look at this stuff. Nothing's hurting you, you don't have to be applying in order to just find out something more, but I definitely think it's such a confusing time.

Katie

Definitely.

Karina

And I feel like even other options bar university, like I feel like a lot of young adults think there's only two options really out there, which is university or employment and that's it. But in reality, there's such a large variety of options out there, including things like apprenticeships, which is like where you're working alongside a professional in the field to gain job specific experience.

There's also degree apprenticeships, there's internships, and this is just to name a few options—and, of course, which one you choose is down to you, and what you want to do with your future.

I would recommend to all of our listeners to have a look at what's available around you have a look at quizzes online, sites such as prospects to just to help you make those decisions and have a look into what you want to do.

Like, how would you feel as a learner? Would you enjoy doing more educational, would you rather gain experience from the field, would you rather do both?

Do you want to do something like take a gap year and just take a little break and make a clearer decision later?

I mean, I don't know. Katie, how did you know that you wanted to go to university?

Katie

So I knew because I wanted to carry on studying. I knew I wanted to learn more, I was always very keen.

I did a lot of revisions, so even through GCSEs and A-levels. Yeah, I was very, very keen to learn more and for me going to university, I didn't have a particular career in mind, as you could probably tell from my story about my gap year and trying musical theatre and stuff. I didn't know, but I knew I wanted to learn more and university was obviously one of the places that would give me more knowledge and so that was why I decided to go.

But some other people, those that know what career, they want to go into, might require a university degree: for example, teaching. All of our teachers out there, our lovely teachers, they all have to have a degree and some form of teacher training qualification if they need to a top up.

Or, if you want to be a doctor, you need to have done a degree in medicine.

So for some people who, if you're not sure whether your career needs a qualification, have a little look, just have a look online and see whether there is a specific qualification that you need, but for most careers and jobs out there... like Karina and I, we both studied something completely different to the job that we're in now, because most jobs will accept you from any sort of degree, so if your pathway changes it really, really doesn't matter.

So yeah, like Karina said, there are so many different pathways, whether that's apprenticeships, internships, just have a look online. And again, there's those quizzes and we've actually done the quizzes ourself, haven't we.

Karina

Yeah, I got some very interesting careers that I was not expecting.

I did get a few like on the legal side as well, which I guess shows the sort of criminology background, but it's really interesting to sort of look into because it wasn't some of that I was expecting and some of them as well, I have never even heard of.

So definitely worth doing those online sort of quizzes.

And I can relate to your point of wanting to study more, I feel like that that was something that was for me as well, but not in the same way. I don't know, I feel like I didn't get the chance to study something that I was really, really enjoying and passionate about and I thought that uni would be a great place to sort of become more independent and grow as an individual, and I had loads of misconceptions about student finance, so once I found out that they weren't true I realized that I could actually go to university and that was an option for me and that's what sort of solidified that I will be going to uni.

Katie

Sorry, just out of interest, did either of your parents go to university?

Karina

No, no, so I was the first person in my family to go to university.

So they didn't have any experience which is, I think, why the sort of knowledge of university and my options and like sort of student finance and so on was a bit confusing.

Because I didn't really have my parents to go to, but of course I still went for it, I still wanted to make an experience, I wanted to become more independent.

And it was definitely one of the best decisions I ever made, because I did get to continue studying and I did really, really enjoy it, I do think that I enjoyed university the most out of any form of education that I've had before.

And it is something that still crosses my mind, to this day, like should I do a Masters one day randomly or something a bit further.

Because it is quite interesting, it's really good to sort of keep developing that knowledge, but again, as you said, you end up in very different fields as well and you can still get really far with not even following that specific pathway.

Katie

Yeah and what you were saying just then about developing those skills like independence, you learn so much from that university experience, regardless of whether you live at your university or are studying from home, you gain so many skills and opportunities that you might not get if you don't go to university.

But, again, there are other skills that you might get from an apprenticeship or an internship that you wouldn't get at university. So all of these options can provide you with so many skills for the future, that again might not relate to your chosen career and that doesn't matter because you've built up so many valuable skills for other areas. Like for Karina and, I we've obviously developed those skills needed for the jobs that we have now and for other careers that we may go into as well.

Karina

Definitely.

Katie

So yeah, that's really, really, really nice.

We also have some other sort of top tips and some ideas to look at to help you get inspired and get motivated for your future pathway, and I was just actually talking about the many different opportunities at university and those experiences that you can get from them.

But one way to sort of help you explore your pathway is by trying different clubs and groups and groups and just trying things, basically, and you don't have to wait until university to try them. We're talking about now, whilst you're in school, whilst you're in college or sixth form.

Just sign up to things that sort of have made you think oh, that might be interesting to try. And if you don't like it, it doesn't matter—you tried it!

Karina

I think it's a good thing if you don't like it, because at the end of the day that crosses off your list, you know, and you're not left wondering, what would have happened if I tried chess, like should I try it now? And, like, you will be pondering that for a while, so why not just try it? If you like it, that's brilliant and you have something new to do, you have a new hobby, you have something to add to your CV, you have a new skill.

And if you don't, well now you know for definite that that's something that you don't really like and you don't have to spend any more time on it, you can just move on to you know the next thing.

Katie

Absolutely, and I think sometimes we can feel a little bit shy or a bit apprehensive about these things but take a friend along, even if they're not bothered about, it at least you've got that support. And then you might even introduce your friend to something new that they enjoy as well, but yeah definitely just try things.

Karina

And do it while you have access to it, whether it is any sort of school clubs or at university or anywhere, do it while you have the chance, because I mean, even as an example, at university, you can try out for sports teams and stuff, some of them for free, some of them at really low prices.

And it's not really something that you have access to—obviously depending on where you live—but I mean if you live somewhere in London you're not going to have access to a countryside climbing wall, but that's something that you might have access to being part of the Rock climbing team or, something like that. So do that while you have access, try those things, so you sort of know and get to experience them.

Katie

Yeah, and there might also be things online, there's obviously a lot more virtual experiences now, so you can have a look at what clubs there might be online, as well, and that also might include sort of online work experience that could help you to realize what you might want to do try something for a couple of weeks, some things might be paid.

So you'd earn a bit of money while you're doing it, which would be really cool, and yeah just get yourself involved in lots of opportunities, volunteer work, or paid work to help you assess what you might want to do.

Explore.

Basically explore your different options to help you realize what you might want to do, and like Karina said, all of these skills and opportunities will contribute to your CV as well, so all really good things.

Another thing, I think we mentioned this earlier actually about the careers quiz: there are loads of sort of careers quizzes, but also apprenticeship quizzes to help you look at what apprenticeship would suit you. There's also, I think, a resource on choosing between an apprenticeship and a university degree.

So if you're torn between those two as well, there's so much online to support you and help you. I think you can pretty much Google anything now and it will help you come up with some helpful resources and signposting for activities you can do.

Karina

And if you don't know what to Google, I feel like that's a very daunting point, like knowing exactly what to look for, and what to actually type into Google initially. And a good thing to do is just sort of get a piece of paper and write down a pros and cons list of all of your options.

Do that, and if you don't have the options that's fine, go even farther back, sit down close your eyes and just visualize yourself in a year, visualize yourself in two years visualize yourself in three years. What do you see, what do you want to see? And start to think about

what can you do it so get yourself just one step closer towards that dream. So, like, no matter what it is, start to think about how you can take tiny little steps to go towards there. So, if we take the example of me in secondary school or in sixth form, and I'm thinking ah, I really see myself at university, what would I do to go one step closer? Research universities, research degrees.

Okay, what if I saw myself specifically doing a criminology degree?

Okay, I can look up online courses that have different criminology aspects or sociology aspects, or if I saw myself in a career, what sort of steps and training and activities can I do to help develop that.

And start to think about things like this and these things will help you find out what to Google and what to look for.

Katie

Yeah and I think also going from that when you're writing it down you've got that bit of paper and you're exploring these options. Then go and talk to your friends and family about it, and see what they say see what they think because if you talk to people you trust, they know you, they know what you're good at, and obviously it's your decision at the end of day—it's really important to note that your future is your decision so you need to make that decision—but it's really important to also share it with your trusted family and friends. Just have a chat, nothing formal, just talk about those options and talk it through, I think it can be really helpful to speak aloud, and explore those options even further.

Another thing that could help you with exploring is, whilst open days are virtual, or if you do get the opportunity to go to an open day that can give you a really good idea or a really good sense of whether the university is for you.

And even if you're *not* thinking about university, but you just want to make sure it's not something you want to do, go to an open day, or go on to a campus and have a little look around. Is this the sort of place you want to be? See if you can visualize yourself there.

And other things that universities offer, like taster sessions or other resources that they might have on their website; I know that we at Essex offer little taster sessions, that you can watch in your own time, on our schools and colleges page.

Just have a look, it honestly only takes a few moments of your time to see whether it's something for you, and maybe that would help you to explore your future pathway even more.

And you can do this from the comfort of your own home as well, that's one of the one of the most amazing things recently, everything is going online, you don't have to go out anywhere, you don't have to sort of drag your parents or your friends along to these things. You can do it from the comfort of your own home or you can even ask your friend or your adult to come and sit with you at a device, have a look online together.

And that's the beauty of that being online, is that you can access it straight away, you can do it right now, after this episode, have a little look online and see what's available.

So we're actually now going to look at and talk about celebrities and well known people and our idols, so having a think about those kind of people that you admire can also help you to get inspired and get motivated.

So there are actually quite a few celebrities, I won't mention it today, but you can have a look online, there are quite a few out there that, did a degree in a certain area, one of the examples is medicine, I think there was a celebrity that's done medicine, and is now a comedian. And I guess what we're trying to highlight here is that, even though they studied something like medicine, they've gone into a completely different career pathway, and this is the same for Karina and I, we both have studied because something completely different. But if you're looking at idols and things that might help you to realize a bit more about the potential pathways that you have. Obviously there are celebrities and idols out there that did study something at uni and in that chosen area.

But that could help you also. If there's an idol out there that you aspire to be like, or follow the same career path, have a look and see what they studied, see where they got to where they are now and that can help you to get onto your pathway.

Karina

Yeah, or even just out of curiosity, why don't you look up your idols and see what pathways they took. It doesn't have to be somebody that you sort of want to follow their pathway, but you can just look at different people and what they've done as well. I think there's some great examples out there.

Katie

Yeah, definitely. Well, actually, there's the great Alan Sugar, he didn't even go to university.

Karina

Oh, really?

Katie

Yeah, so while you're looking at those people there might be some examples there were people didn't go to university or they did an apprenticeship. Like Jamie Oliver, he did an apprenticeship, that's how he started his career. You've got Ian McKellen as well, he did an apprenticeship at a theatre, so there are so many different options, so many different pathways.

We've also got Dina Asher-Smith, who's a British sprinter and she's recently been in the news because of her victory, she's an Olympic gold medallist, and she's only 25.

Karina

Oh, my God.

Katie

She just graduated with a history degree, and I just selected this person, partly because of her recent headlines, but also because she's such a talented person in terms of her sports, but to find out that she also has a degree in history is just—wow, it just shows that you can do both things, you can pursue both of your ambitions, if you want to. So if you are a keen sportsperson, an athlete, or want to pursue something in sport, you could, you can do both, you can definitely pursue both, and I think it's good to have a backup as well, because you never know when your sporting career might finish or you might have an injury.

And that's not just in sport, as well, there's those other practical subjects that people are interested in. Having a backup is never, never an issue.

Karina

Yeah, a hundred percent agree with that, and if any of our listeners do find out something interesting about their sort of idol or celebrity in their pathway to success, then feel free to tweet us with the hashtag #understandinguniversity.

Katie

Yeah, thanks Karina, I think it'd be a really good thing to do, just now, just to have a look, and that might get you started on finding your pathway.

But the main thing is not to worry too much, I think what we're trying to say here is that whatever you decide to do there is no rush, you can take a gap year, you can have a couple of gap years.

Whatever you decide to do, don't rush, start to look now, look at what is out there, try some of these things that we've talked about in this episode.

And think about your priorities, what do you want to do in the next few years, what do you want to achieve from life? Whether that's buying a house, a family, or getting into that career that you've always wanted to do, think about those priorities and go from there, and remember that your pathway doesn't have to be fixed and it's absolutely your decision.

Karina

That's amazing, amazing points—thank you, Katie.

If any of our listeners have any questions don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #understandinguniversity or send an email to outreach@essex.ac.uk.

You can also email us to register, if you have not already. If you have registered then additional resources will be sent to you via email as well as being made available on our websites.

If you enjoyed this episode, why not give us a like and share it with anyone you think might find this useful, and we'll see you next time!