
Choosing Your Course and Your University

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 3**

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.

Katie

And my name is Katie and I also work for the Outreach Team. If you have any questions about any topics we discuss in this episode, please use the hashtag #understandinguni on Twitter, or you can email outreach@essex.ac.uk

Karina

So today we'll be discussing choosing a university course, and a university as well.

And we have two of our student ambassadors with us here today, they are both undergraduate students and they'll help us with any questions that we have with them today. So, Matteo, why don't you introduce yourself?

Matteo

Hi everyone, my name is Matteo, I come from Italy, I'm studying a degree in PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) with Placement Year and I'm currently in my final and fourth year. I used to live on campus in my first few years and now I live off campus.

Karina

Thank you for that, that's great. And Megan, would you like to introduce yourself?

Megan

Yeah, hello everyone. I'm Megan, I studied Psychology with Cognitive Neuroscience. I'm in my third year and I used to live on campus in my first year, and now I live off campus.

Katie

Thank you guys.

So we'll be talking to Megan and Matteo in just a moment in much more detail, as we have some great questions for them today about their courses, how they chose their degree course and why they chose the University of Essex, as well.

There are so many courses to choose from, so it can be quite overwhelming when you're looking at universities, so our episode today will hopefully help our listeners to understand how to choose a course and also provide our listeners with the next steps on choosing their universities they want to apply for.

Karina

So we're going to start off by speaking to Megan, who actually studied psychology at Essex. So, Megan, would you mind sharing with us a brief summary of your sort of pathway from school or college to university and how and why you ended up choosing Psychology.

Megan

Yeah, of course. So I went straight from college to university, so I didn't take a gap year, unlike some people. I found that this was the best way for me, but obviously it's different for everyone. I chose Psychology because I really enjoyed the subject at A-level and I thought it was very interesting. I love the science of the brain, so I thought, why not study it more, it's a subject I'm really enjoying.

Karina

That's really great, thank you. I just wanted to ask, because I did notice that there's a BA and a BSc in psychology—could you explain the differences, and explain to us which one you chose and why as well?

Megan

Okay, yeah, I can. So, a BA is a Bachelor of Arts and a BSc, which is the one I'm studying, is a Bachelor of Science.

Katie

Thank you Megan. And so, Matteo, you obviously shared which course you're studying earlier, and you mentioned three subjects. Could you explain a little bit more about that for me, please?

Matteo

Of course. So, actually, the interdisciplinary nature of the degree is what attracted me first to come to Essex to do a Bachelor's degree.

So my course, of course, combines three subjects which I mentioned earlier—Philosophy, Politics and Economics—and it allows me to study different modules from the three different departments. So in my first year I started introductory modules for the three different subjects, so that I got a good general overview of what the subjects are about and then, in my second and third year, I was allowed to specialise in the subjects I preferred, so I decided to drop Economics and to focus more on Politics and Philosophy, especially. But I am really enjoying this degree, because it gave me a lot of freedom to choose, you know, from year to year, different modules, and, yeah, whatever was more of interest for me.

Katie

That's really nice. So when you were at school or college, how did you sort of decide that that was the course for you?

Matteo

So I did study Philosophy in secondary school in Italy, and I really liked Philosophy, but I didn't like it enough to study a whole degree on Philosophy so, then I learned that, you know, in the UK, they offered this type of degree and, you know, with Economics and Politics, and that's why I decided to come here.

Katie

Wow, yeah, that's really great. Thank you both for that.

So, for our listeners who aren't sure where to start, you can either start looking at universities websites, and have a look at all the courses that they offer, or you can even go on to UCAS.com and UCAS will show you all of the different courses that are offered all over the UK at every university, to get a really good picture of what is on offer.

But this actually will show you so many options and that could be a good starting point for some people.

Karina

I do feel like quite a few students struggle with this, though, sort of seeing so many options that it's quite impossible to look through each and every university to see what they offer, so what would you suggest to students struggling with something like this?

Katie

Well, there are quite a few things that you can look at when you're trying to narrow down your choices so, yeah, that actually would be quite overwhelming seeing all of those courses there. So, there are a few things you can do to start. One of the first things you can do is look at your entry requirements. So these are the requirements set out by the University that you have to meet to be considered for the course, and these range from your GCSE qualifications and then qualifications you've got from your college or sixth form, like your A-levels, BTECs, or HE diplomas.

And there's actually a website called uniguide.co.uk, and you can search for degree courses by the entry requirements, so you can realistically see what sort of places you could apply for.

And, of course, if you haven't got your qualifications yet, that's okay you use your predicted grades set out by your colleges and sixth forms to help you with this. So, Megan, did you when you were looking at the course Psychology, did you look at the entry requirements when you were looking around?

Megan

Yes, I did. My entry requirements were BBB and it was very useful to be able to see what I would get compared to what the entry requirements for the university were.

Katie

Lovely, thank you. And for you, Matteo, when you were looking, I know you chose your course because it was offered at Essex, but was entry requirements something that you considered when you were looking?

Matteo

So, I had quite a different path to university, as I had to go through Clearing.

So pretty much I applied to come and study here at Essex in the summer, when usually— well, at the time the deadline ended in January and so I had to make my application to UCAS as usual, but I also had to get in touch with different universities directly through email.

But when I was choosing them on the universities, yeah I did look at the entry requirements, I didn't meet the initial entry requirements for Essex, but I still I still applied. I got in touch with them, with the university, and I still was offered a place to study here.

Katie

Amazing.

Karina

I'm quite curious, Matteo, did you ever find it quite daunting to pick the degree that you did, because it is— I mean, I don't know, I get the impression that a lot of students sort of think that university is finally the time to focus on one sort of topic area and go really into depth with it, so how did you feel with that, did that make you feel a bit anxious at all, or were you more excited for it?

Matteo

Personally, I find it much more exciting because, as I said, I wasn't too sure about Philosophy and I had an interest in Politics and Economics, and the three subjects are really related to each other.

The University of Essex, for example, has a whole department in interdisciplinary studies, so there are big connections between these three subjects and studying a joint degree I think, allows you to get a wider perspective on problems. Of course there's less specialisation, but often times I'm able to get ideas from different subjects and make connections between them, so, although it's not as specialised as a traditional degree, I think, it's still very, very valuable and I think it also keeps your options open for the future, because you can still specialise in any of the three subjects in a post, postgraduate degree. For example, now I'm looking to study a master's in Philosophy, so it doesn't mean that you won't specialise. It just gives you a bit more time to do it.

Katie

So, as well as looking at those entry requirements to help you narrow down your course choices, another thing you can look at is the module content, so I'm just going to ask Megan whether you looked at the content when you were looking at your course, and if you could also explain what *modules* are as well, please.

Megan

Yeah, no problem. So, firstly I'll start by explaining what a module is so it'll be bit clearer. So, it's basically like a subset within your degree, basically that you take classes on just that subset of things, almost like a lesson, but specifically within your degree.

So I did look at these beforehand, and I would recommend it to anyone, it's very useful in seeing what the university offers, what you'd be interested in, and often the university gives like a brief paragraph about what is within this module.

I think that could be really helpful in understanding your choices a bit more, because it definitely affected where I was going to apply to, because there are some modules at Essex that I really liked the look of.

Katie

Nice, and where can you find information about the module content?

Megan

Uhm, most of the time you can find it on the course pages, I know for Essex you can, it may vary for some unis, but yeah.

Katie

So did you know specifically what you wanted to study when you were looking at the module content, or did it take you some time, did you have to look at a few to realise what you wanted and that helped you to narrow it down?

Megan

I think I looked across a few to narrow it down, but I was really genuinely interested in the subject, so I was very open at the time to seeing different modules and experiencing different things.

Katie

Thank you for that. I think we're now going to talk a little bit about assessment criteria, so we've just talked about how you can look at your entry requirements, the module content and, yeah, over to you Karina.

Karina

Yeah, I think, just to add before we move over to the assessment methods, I think, mentioning of modules is really important, because it does very much distinguish courses that might have the exact same name across two different universities, but the actual content... So I do agree with Megan and I do agree that students should definitely look into the module so you can find out exactly what will be studied throughout your time at university.

But yeah, definitely, another really important thing to look at is: how will your course be assessed?

So at school, college, and sixth form, as far as I remember, we don't really have a choice on how we're assessed.

But when you're actually making a decision on the degree course that you'd like to do you are in control of that. You can find some degrees that are completely coursework-based or completely exam-based or balanced-out. Was the assessment methods something you considered, Matteo?

Matteo

So, again, with my joint degree my experience with assessment methods was quite particular, because different departments have different assessment methods. So, while I had a mix of coursework and exams for Politics and Economics, I only do coursework in my Philosophy modules, so for those who are listening, if they don't know the difference between the two: basically, coursework is usually essays or problem sets, anyway, assignments that are done throughout the year. Usually you get two or three weeks time to complete

them, whereas exams are done at the end of the year, usually in the summer term, and you have two hours or three hours, depending on the module, you ask some questions, and you have this time to complete it. But yeah, as I said, different subjects have different assessment methods, and so I was able to experience all of them.

Personally, I prefer the coursework, the essays, because I struggle with, you know, anxiety and stress during exams. Only having three hours stresses me out quite a lot, so even if I know the things I tend to forget them, so I definitely advise looking at, you know, assessment methods when choosing the modules, or beforehand, when choosing a degree.

Karina

I think that's a really, really good point as well. I think, as an ex-uni student, I still feel like I don't have a preference. I did very much enjoy having an equal split between exams and coursework.

I used to hate exams as well, and when I came to university sitting through a three hour exam was somehow actually quite peaceful for me and I did enjoy writing it out.

What's your opinion on the assessment methods, and did you look into how you will be assessed? And how do you get assessed now, Megan?

Megan

Yeah, I did actually look into assessment methods, well, I'm dyslexic, so I kind of struggled with exams and everything.

And so it was really important to me whether coursework was the majority, basically, and often it is. In my course we've had a lot of multiple choice exams, which is always nice, obviously.

But the majority of our percentages are usually coursework, we had about an equal split throughout the first two years of my course overall, but the last year, the year that I'm in now, I currently choose all of my modules—besides obviously my dissertation—and the majority of my course now is coursework, because I chose to adapt it to myself, which is a great thing about looking into your course beforehand, because then you find out whether you can adapt it to yourself, like that.

Katie

Yeah, and I think just talking about your preferences in terms of assessment methods is a great time for me to mention that lots of these things will be down to your preference, so if the way something is assessed is something that's really important to you, then that's something you'll want to look into in a bit more detail when you are narrowing down your course choices.

Another thing that you might want to think about is your contact hours. They're called different things at different universities, but generally, this is the time that you spend in your lectures or seminars, or, if you do a practical-based subject, that might be in a lab, or a studio doing Drama or Dance or something like that.

And this changes when you come to university so when you're at school or college, generally you're in a lesson. You're going to lessons throughout the day from nine till three, but when you're at uni this changes.

Megan, what were your contact hours like in the first year of uni?

Megan

Within the first year, they were roughly between 10 and 15 hours of lectures and classes. During this time I had lab work where I'd get almost one-on-one time with the lecturer and PhD students who would help out in those, and that was really useful for learning how to do all the stats and everything like that, because obviously that can be a bit more complicated sometimes.

There are opportunities for other contact hours, for instance, a lot of my lecturers offer office hours and the tutors are always ready to be emailed and everything like that, so they're very easily accessible. Also, there are other ways to get lab time, for instance, I know Essex offers work experience (paid and unpaid), so that can be really helpful and it can definitely be helpful to understanding the work better, and I took part in some of them.

Katie

Nice.

Did you look up your contact hours before you applied for the course?

Megan

I did, I also spoke to other students who are already on my course before I attended my course, just to find out a bit more about what it was like, yeah.

Katie

Nice, and Matteo, what were your contact hours like in your first year?

Matteo

So, I also had a mix of lectures and seminars. So, usually, lectures have large numbers— they're the lesson, the main lesson and they have large number of students, it can be, you know, depending on the modules different modules have different numbers, but it can be up to 100 students, for example, and so they're usually the teacher is just delivering the content, explaining whatever topic we're discussing in that week.

And then after the lecture, on a different day, usually, we will have a class which will be smaller, will be around 10, 15 people in there, we are able to ask questions directly or we will try to resolve problems, in the case of Economics.

And so there, we could actually go into details and I could get clarification about what I personally didn't understand, and, as Megan said, there is also this academic support hours, where I can go and talk to the teacher directly, and I think these actually are the most useful contact time, because sometimes you can have one-to-one with the professor, so you can really, you know, ask questions and get clarifications.

So yeah, this was my experience.

Katie

Thank you, Matteo. So, as you can hear from our ambassadors, the time that you have at university, the lessons are a little bit different to what it's like at school and college, and Megan was saying that in her first

year, she did about 15 hours contact time which, if you spread that out across a week is probably about three or four lessons in maybe two- or three-hour chunks, so that actually reduces your timetable down quite a lot. So if you are looking to have a lot of contact hours, then obviously that is something that you'll want to look at when choosing your course.

You'll want to make sure your contact hours are quite high so that you get the support that you may want if that is something that you would need or require.

And if you are looking to study a practical subject that involves lab work or being in a studio, you want to make sure that those practical hours are quite high, especially if you enjoy that part of a course.

Karina

So, now that we've sort of covered the choosing your course area and all of the details surrounding that I wanted to know how you guys chose your university. What process did you take, Matteo?

Matteo

So, as I said earlier, I went through clearing, so I applied quite late during the summer. That's when I decided to move to the UK to study a degree here. What made me decide to come to the UK in the first place was, as I said earlier, the degree PPE.

Then I got in touch with different universities which were still offering, still had places available during the clearing period, and the reason why I chose Essex in particular was by looking at the rankings, so I compared Essex with the other options I had.

And the Department of Government, within which PPE falls, was actually ranking quite well, and so I thought, you know, would be a good option for me.

And also, another important thing in coming to Essex was that there's a lot of international students here and another reason for moving to the UK to study abroad was that of, you know, meeting different people and experiencing different cultures, and so, yeah, the high number of international students was also a big reason for me to choose, to choose Essex.

Karina

That's some great points, thank you Matteo.

What about you, Megan, what was your sort of process through picking the university that you ended up making your final decision to attend?

Megan

Yeah, well I looked also looked at the university rankings, for instance I looked at their ranking in research and the University of Essex ranked quite high on that, so I was very happy, and, like, this really appealed to me, obviously, as I was going to study a science.

Also, when I visited the uni on an open day, the atmosphere was amazing. I really was just attracted to the uni and I really wanted to go here. It just really appealed to me, I think that's really, like, a big thing when a uni just appeals to you like that.

Karina

Yeah I definitely agree with that. Yeah, Katie, would you like to add anything else?

Katie

Yeah, so I think both Matteo and Megan raise points that we would sort of advise people to think about when choosing a university, which is: maybe look at the rankings if that's something that you're really keen on looking into, if that's something that you think is important definitely check those out, they're obviously all online, and you can find them via the university's website, as well.

And open days, I think going to an open day will give you a really good picture, a really good feel for what it would be like to study there and help you to make your decision, because you can get a good idea of the atmosphere, like Megan said.

You could perhaps visualise yourself there and obviously you get to talk to current students, get to talk to the academics as well, and ask any questions that you have, so definitely I would highly recommend if you're looking at universities—go to an open day, go to virtual open days and visit them from the comfort of your own home, which is great, you don't have to travel.

And some other things to consider: maybe location, so if it's really important for you to go to a university near to where you live, then obviously location will be a really important thing that you look into.

Or there might be a certain area in the UK that you're really keen on visiting. Again, I would recommend going to that area to get a good idea of whether you can see yourself there, and whether the university is in a suitable location.

And something else as well is the academics. Are there particular academics that you're keen on being taught by, or what do you think that they would be able to provide you with all the knowledge and expertise that you require about the course you want to study?

And also accommodation, if you're thinking about moving to university, is that accommodation appropriate for you? Is it on campus, is it off campus? Obviously at Essex, we have accommodation, both on and off and we will be talking about accommodation a bit more in some other episodes. So yeah, it is at the end of the day, down to what you prioritise. So what do you want from your university?

And that will be different for every single person, so think about your priorities, whether that's the location, the atmosphere, the facilities, including what you will be able to access—for example, at the library or student services with additional support.

Yeah, it's going to be up to you at the end of the day.

Karina

Yeah I very much agree with this, and to all of our listeners at this point now we've gone over sort of you finding out what course you'd want to do, what university you want to study at, so at this point what do you do? and the simple and straight forward answer is: visit UCAS. UCAS is a charity that provides a platform for students to complete online application forms when applying to higher education courses.

So you fill in the section with personal details, grades and predicted grades, and you write a personal statement.

And then someone at your college or sixth form will write a reference for you, as well.

You can apply to up to five universities and you'll be notified when universities have made a decision on your application what the next steps are.

It's very simple and easy to use, and if you do want to find out more you can visit their website, which is UCAS.com.

Katie

Yes, thank you Karina, and after that application, the only other application that you'll have to do is to apply for your student finance. So, university does cost money, but for all UK students studying a full-time undergraduate course can apply for a student loan to cover their fees. This is a loan provided by Student Finance England and we will be covering all of student finance in another episode.

Karina

Yeah, I just wanted to say thank you so much to our brilliant ambassadors today, you really did give such a great explanation and it was such a good insight looking into your guys' experiences, so thank you so much for coming along today.

Katie

Yes, thank you.

Matteo

Was my pleasure.

Megan

Yeah, thank you.

Katie

So if any of our listeners have any questions, please don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #understandinguni, or you can send an email to outreach@essex.ac.uk.

And make sure you're registered by completing our online form, which will be popped in the description box, and this means that you'll never miss out on an episode and will receive links to all the resources that we've mentioned in the podcast series.

We'll also drop some of the links we've mentioned in the comments box on SoundCloud.

Karina

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