
Life as a Uni Student

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 5**

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 alongside Karina at the University. 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.

Karina

So in today's episode we'll be discussing what life is like as an undergraduate student and provide you with some tips along the way, so today we have two guest speakers who are both current students at the University of Essex. Hello Timea, would you like to introduce yourself?

Timea

Hi everyone! Thank you, Karina, for the introduction, my name is Timea, I'm from Slovakia and I'm a student, basically in my third year undergrad. I study BA International Relations and Modern Languages.

Karina

Thank you very much for that, and, Rebecca, would you like to introduce yourself?

Rebecca

Hi everyone! I'm Rebecca, I'm currently a Master's student studying International Human Rights Law, I did my undergrad here at Essex as well, and I did Law with Politics with a year abroad.

Katie

Welcome, both of you, thank you. So, from a young age, we are continuing to learn and develop as we move our way through education.

After college or sixth form, lots of students decide to go to university where they continue to learn, improve and develop their skills and knowledge.

To make the absolute most of your university experience it's important to improve your study skills and prepare for your studies and so today we'll be asking Timea and Rebecca, our current students, how they study well, their top tips for engaging in lectures and seminars, and how you can prepare to make the most out of your degree when you go to university too.

Karina

So students usually have anywhere between 8 to 30 contact hours per week at university.

These are usually spread across the week and may mean that you might have a really busy day one day, but be completely free on another.

The lessons have slightly different structures, compared to what you may be used to at school or college: some of these structures include a tutorial, labs, seminars, and lectures. So, Rebecca, would you like to tell us what a lecture is and what was your first experience of one?

Rebecca

Okay, so a lecture is just, it's like a big classroom, and it's usually filled with, depends how big your course is, but if your course is really— if your course is big or average-sized it's usually filled with hundreds of people, and it's usually everyone that's doing that course.

And I had my first lecture, my first lecture at the beginning of Freshers' Week because we had taster sessions and I got to see everyone that was in the Law course, as well. Even though I was doing a joint degree, I would go to the Law classes with everyone that was doing Law, and I would go to the Politics classes with everyone that was doing Politics: it's basically just a big hall with everyone who's studying your course.

Karina

Thank you very much for that, and how would you best sort of advise students to prepare for lectures or seminars ahead of time?

Rebecca

What I usually do is, because I really struggled to stay attentive in lectures, so I usually, like, try to prepare beforehand by going through the PowerPoints and with Law it's a lot of reading, so I tried to go through the reading list before the lecture. That way, I know what the lecturer's talking about, because sometimes it can get very technical and difficult so it's best to have knowledge before going into the lectures and also having study buddies, as well, so you can study together and they also make you accountable and make you attend lectures because you're studying together and they see you there and they make you go. I think that's how I did my plans for lectures.

Karina

Could you just expand on what a reading list is for our listeners that may not know what that means?

Rebecca

Okay, so a reading list is a list of readings that you usually have to do before a lecture or tutorial. And it could be two books to twelve! It really depends on what the topic is and sometimes it will be cases for law or like actual books or journals. And it's just basically to expand your knowledge and to make you understand either the debates or the reasoning for the topic that you're covering.

Karina

Timea, what is your sort of experience with lectures or seminars?

Timea

I have to say that I was really excited.

I remember it, for me personally, it was like from a movie that there were so many students in one place, you know, getting into one big hall, everyone sitting and getting to know new people, and so I was really excited about it, and then there was a lecturer talking about this serious stuff so that was a really, really nice and I just want to mention that, like Rebecca said, reading list is really useful for students, so you know what the what the lecture is going to be about, so different topics: it can be about past about the present, but it's not—sometimes it can be one book or chapters of different topics or journals...

I used to also read it, go through it, sometimes I just read abstracts, it really depends, how many readings we have, but just to get into, like, to know what we will be talking about so I can also be a part of the discussion at the end.

Karina

Definitely, that's a great point, and I just wanted to ask about if you've had any experience with seminars and what they are like.

Timea

Um, so, my seminars, as I have a joint degree, for me it's language: so firstly we have a class together discussing more grammar, and then during the seminars, we used to discuss the slides going through different topics, how to understand it, to work through it.

But basically, as I studied international relations, I have lectures and classes, that is, I will say, the system is the same, so lectures of learning, studying, getting to know the topic and then discuss it through classes.

Karina

And do the sizes vary at all between lectures and seminars, because as Rebecca mentioned, you can get up to hundreds of people in your lectures, is it the same for seminars?

Timea

Uhm, yeah it's not the same. Like with the lecture because there could be like 100 students, but usually the number for classes and seminars is around 15 students, no more than 20, it's like 10 to 15 so we can lead discussion and participate equally.

Karina

That's great. Thank you very much for that.

Your courses may also offer different types of assessments, which is something that I thought would be important to mention.

My BA Criminology course had an equal split between coursework and exams.

And it did include some group work and I really enjoyed that split, I will say that I did enjoy doing both coursework and exams, even with the dissertation being really, really tough and extremely long. Rebecca, how was your assessment split on your degree, and do you have a preference?

Rebecca

With mine it wasn't split 50/50, so some were exams and some were coursework. Back in my undergrad I actually preferred exams to coursework because just coming out sixth form, I enjoyed exams more because coursework is a long period of time, while exams, you revise and just do it there and then, that's it.

But now, and over the years, I prefer coursework because I'm starting to really enjoy my reading and taking my time and going through the essays bit by bit, so I think you could— your preference changes over time, but back with my undergrad I did had some modules that were purely exam and I had some modules that were purely coursework.

But I think it just depends on, like, the modules, it wasn't split 50/50 or anything, and then because I didn't really have optional modules like some people, some people had the option of having an optional module so they could pick whether to do more exam-based or to do more coursework-based depending on what they felt like.

So mine was just a bit all over the place, I kind of got the feel of both.

Karina

Thank you very much for that, and could you sort of expand on how much you had to write, for your coursework as an undergraduate student. Like, what's the sort of normal word count for that and how long would your exams usually be, does it differ at all from college and sixth form?

Rebecca

Yes! It's so long ago, I kind of remember all the way from first year, but I think about 2000 words will be the amount for a coursework, and exam about two/three hours... My last exam I had for law was in second year, because most of the exams I had was with the politics, and that was usually an hour, was usually multiple choice, so that wasn't that bad.

But with law it's a lot, it was problem questions and finding the answers and that could take a long time to write, it's about two hours and then you get maybe like two to three questions and sometimes that covers the whole year, so you have to, like, revise everything, so yeah.

Karina

I can definitely agree with that, I do recall, when I was doing my criminology degree as well, in exams— just sitting there for up to three hours answering only three questions, but you do really have to expand on those questions and they're obviously worth a lot more marks than what I was used to when I was writing my A-level exams. Timea, what about your course, how is the assessment split, do you have a preference at all?

Timea

So, basically, we call it generally assessments, but it belongs, for example, essays, then it can be also group work, then there are different kinds of exams or presentation, so it's a mixture of oral and written assignment and also, then, it happened to me that we had also a portfolio, so we had to collect our pieces of works we did, so have like a proof that like of my work during the whole year, and essays is the same it's around 2000 to 3000 words, it really varies, what is the value of that assessment.

Coming back to modules, Rebecca slightly touched that topic, so in my first year, I had compulsory modules so there wasn't that many modules I could choose from, but in the second and third year it's more free, like it depends on the student, what he or she wants to focus on.

Karina

That's great, thank you very much, and just to follow that up Timea, do you use the library at all, or student centre, what's your sort of experience with the on-campus sort of study spaces?

Timea

I have to say, for me, personally I love the library.

It's open 24 hours, so it's pretty flexible for each student, if you want to come early or late, and this depends on actually your own timetable basically.

But there are also many printer. So when I want to scan something, copy, there is so many opportunities that I can do it in one place everything together, and library has many quiet spaces, so it's a good place to meet with your schoolmates or module mates and work on your assignment, so really recommend.

Karina

Definitely, thank you for that.

There's usually lots of places on university campuses for you to study.

At University of Essex, specifically, we have a library, multiple IT labs, a student centre and free classrooms for you to use as well.

So, as Timea mentioned, she does prefer the library, the library, it's a bit more of a quieter place for students to sit down and study in comparison to the student centre where you can come, bring your own laptop or use the computers provided there, you can sort of have chats with your friends there as well, so it is a bit more of a relaxed study space.

And there's also other facilities available for students, such as academic services, tutorials and support groups, so you don't ever have to feel alone when you come to university, I know that that's something that is on a lot of students minds, but you definitely have a lot of support services available to you.

Katie

It's also really important to remember that every university will offer a variety of different facilities as Karina mentioned and they'll all have different systems in the way that they operate as well.

You can check out the university's facilities by looking online or visiting in person on an open day.

So there's a lot to do whilst you're at university, so it's really important that you don't shut yourself away studying for hours.

You should find a balance between studying and socialising and that's why universities offer so many wonderful additional activities for you to enjoy.

At university, there will be a venue called the *Student Union* who will offer a huge variety of sports clubs and societies and more, as well as opportunities for volunteering and part-time work.

Your university may also have cafes, restaurants, and bars on campus for you to use when you're not studying.

So Rebecca, please could you just explain what the *Student Union* is, and how you use your free time, and whether that includes the *Student Union* or not?

Rebecca

Okay, so the way I like to describe the Students' Union is, just like a body of students for students and the *Student Union's* very helpful with societies and sports, like you just said.

And I remember when I first started and I didn't know anything was going on campus or uni, the *Student Union* had, you know, had a website and then have like what's on events on it.

So I could kind of see what was going on throughout the day and throughout the week as well, and what I used the most, I would say, was the cinema, we had a cinema on campus and it was by the student, was run by the Student Union.

And the first time I went it was actually because I did an event with Student Union and I won free cinema tickets, I was like "Okay, let me go check it out".

And it was really good because it was like half the price you pay in a normal cinema.

And it was really recent movies, as well, and you get to watch on campus as well, so we didn't have to travel off campus, I really like that.

Katie

Thank you for that, Rebecca.

And Timea, are there any parts of the student Union you particularly enjoy that you think our listeners might not know about, or have experienced before?

Timea

What was really special for me was the priority of societies, so this student, you know also shelters also um, lot of hobbies, so these societies, it can be about art and craft, sports, or even movie societies, cultural societies, so there is a much to choose from.

And also what I really like were our one-off events, for example, Christmas run with Santa then also I remember an egg hunt day, or actually there was the whole week, so there is a lot of activities for students to participate and then you can also take a photo of it and be a part of any competition, so it's really great.

Katie

That's really cool, we're going to talk a bit more about some of the bigger-scale events like Freshers' Week and Freshers Fairs a bit later on.

But these sorts of opportunities are fantastic for students, because not only can you have a bit of fun and make friends and socialize, some of these opportunities can also deepen your knowledge and help you to gain skills that you might not have had before, and Timea, would you mind just talking about why this is so important for students?

Timea

It's very important for socialising.

As you come into a new environment you don't know many people, anyone really, and it's really an easy way to start chatting and talking and the societies are usually the first step.

Like, what interests you and the others have same interest, so it's really easy, and then you suddenly become the best friends during the whole year thanks to one society meeting.

Katie

Definitely, those first few weeks in, at university with *Freshers' Week* and *Freshers' Fairs* and then joining the societies and clubs really will help you to, to gain those friendships for your university experience.

And not only that, these experiences will also help you to gain skills that will contribute to the future.

For life in general and for any future jobs or careers.

So we've talked a bit about how you guys spend your free time and the events and society that you've been a part of.

But I'm intrigued to know what your average day is like as a student so let's start with Timea first, could you share with our listeners what an average day as a student is like, please.

Timea

For me, a basic, usual day is I basically get up, have something to eat, and then it really depends on my schedule, so if I have morning classes or lectures I go there, then I have a meeting with my friends, if I have a break there between lectures or classes and then probably I finish around four, and I have something to eat again and go for a society meeting, or I have sport class.

So something really more energetic after the whole day of sitting and concentrating.

And then, sometimes I watch a movie alone or with friends, and we are still chatting so that's really important to share what was going on during the whole day for me and for them.

Katie

I just wanted to say that I love that you mentioned that you, you have something to eat because it's important to stay energized when you're studying, and all the socialising and the sports, as well, it's important to make sure that you're well-fed and prepared for your day.

And Rebecca, is your day any similar to Timea or different?

Rebecca

My days are usually never the same, it just depends on the day, and my course varies so I tend to have a lot of free time.

I tend to have really, really less contact hours, sometimes I have two days in a week where I don't have lectures at all, and sometimes I only have lectures just once.

So I have a lot of free time, so what I usually do, I have a list of things to complete in that day and I just do it whenever I feel like it, and I think that's the flexibility of being a student, you're working on your own time in your own way.

So different days I have different routines, sometimes I work at home, sometimes I go to the student centre, sometimes I work alone, sometimes I work with friends.

Sometimes I just focus on socializing and sometimes I just work till 12 o'clock at night, so it really, really varies, and I think I like that flexibility and being able to do things in my own time.

Katie

And how do you make sure that you've got a good balance between your studying but also socializing and having that free time as well just to relax?

Rebecca

I think what I do is the to-do list so I have a like, even though my days are free and I do whatever I feel like doing, I do plan what I need to complete each day for work, and if there was an event or society or somewhere I want to go to I also put that in my plan for the week, so I know on Tuesday I need to do, six hours of work — however I split the six hours depending on how I feel on that day, but I make sure those six hours of work are completed, or on Thursday I have lectures, 2 hours of lecture and I know I definitely need to go to those. So I just plan out what is priority and what I want to complete each day, but then I do it in whatever way I feel like doing it, and then I managed to work, you manage to work.

Karina

Thank you very much, Rebecca and Timea for your insights into sort of how you balance your socializing and studying, and how all of that functions together.

The next sort of topic area that I wanted to move on to that I think is really crucial is living on your own at universities.

So when you begin university, you can choose to live on campus and in the halls of residency, you don't necessarily have to, but that is an option, examples of what students will look at to distinguish different accommodations include looking at how many people you will be living with, what the shared common area provides and whether it's an en-suite or not, but the list isn't limited to that, definitely.

So can I ask, Timea, did you stay in accommodation in your first year, if so, why did you choose it?

Timea

I decided to stay on the campus as I wanted to absorb the atmosphere of the campus university and I was living in the North Towers, but like it's quite busy and crowded, but for me it was that I want to meet many people, and I want to talk to them, like they're also from different corners of the world, so this was really important for me that I was— that my accommodation will occupy me, kind of, also.

Karina

That's great.

And, did you have an en-suite, and for any of our listeners that don't know what that is, and that is a sort of joint bathroom, so you can either have a bathroom connected to your room, or one that you share in communal spaces, so was that something that you had, was that something that you worried about at all, and what did you think about the common areas as well, that were provided.

Timea

No, I had no en-suite, as the North Towers it's basically about sharing common space, like the kitchen and the bathroom and toilet with the others.

But for me personally it wasn't that bad issue, as I was previously living also with some friends of mine and flatmates, so it was pretty fine for me.

Karina

That's perfect. Thank you so much, and Rebecca, what was your choice in accommodation, if you did end up choosing halls of residency?

Rebecca

I lived in the Meadows.

Because when I came for open days I saw Towers and I saw Meadows, and I just didn't like the Towers.

My preference, I think, for me, I wanted to meet people, but not too many people and that en-suite was very, very important to me, I wanted to have my own bathroom.

And, I think, also I like the fact that the Meadows was just a bit away from the central part of campus so you could you can get away a bit, while the Towers is on campus, so I think that was very important for me and in the Meadows there wasn't as many people as Towers, but there were still people and the people I knew that lived in my accommodation also did my course, so it was kind of nice to go to lectures together.

Karina

That's very nice. Thank you so much.

But yeah there is so much- so many different types of accommodation available across all of the universities in the UK.

So we definitely recommend sort of having a look into it, I will have to stick with Timea on this one, because when I was an undergraduate I did live in the Towers as well, so I'll always, always stick to that, but I can definitely see why you made your choice to opt for an en-suite accommodation.

So, Timea, what did you do in your second or third year, what were your next steps after living in halls of residency?

Timea

I have to say that, except the SU, we also have the SU homes, so we have the office that helps students to find accommodation outside the campus and so during in my first year we went there with a friend of mine, we asked them what they have, if they have any free houses to book and go to see and we decided after many viewings go for a house, small house in Wivenhoe, so that's, let's say, 15 to 20 minutes from the campus.

It's lovely green area because I really like sport and running and that was for me a win-win, so we decided there was actually a house for three students, and yeah we signed a contract, and that it was, that the SU homes are really helpful.

Karina

Thank you very much for that, and for any of our listeners that aren't familiar with what SU homes means, it's essentially just part of the Students Union organization at the university and they're just there to sort of help you sort out and take those first steps in living in your own new rented apartment or house with other students, so they're just there sort of to support you, it's like a lettings agency on campus.

And so, when you move out of home, it can be quite overwhelming as you take on a whole bunch of new responsibilities, and these responsibilities include things like doing your own cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, doing your own laundry, and things like learning how to budget which, if you want any more tips on that, you can check out our *Managing Money* episode.

But Rebecca, how was your experience doing these things completely independently, did you struggle at all, did you have to learn anything at all?

Rebecca

I think, for me, I didn't struggle that much compared to others.

But what I did struggle with was eating, because, as students, we're always on the go, always doing things, it's kind of hard to remember to eat, sometimes I struggled with remembering to cook meals and actually eat, and in terms of budgeting and I think I was pretty okay with budgeting.

But I would say it was difficult with the laundry at first, like me, my flatmates we had people that would go back home and take their laundry back home because they just didn't know how to use the laundry.

But once we figured it out, because we had, the laundry place was just right next to us, so it wasn't that difficult, but we just didn't know how to use it, but once we learned how to use it, it was good to do our own laundry.

Karina

I will say I completely relate to you, Rebecca, and just for our listeners, so they know, the laundry washing machines aren't the ones that you're used to at home, as well, they are quite complicated, so I don't blame you at all, it's quite tricky, isn't it.

Rebecca

Yeah.

Katie

So, earlier we were talking a bit about the societies and extra events that the Student Union and the university offer.

But what about Freshers' Week, then, when you first start university.

Rebecca, would you mind sharing what your experience of that was like?

Rebecca

Freshers' Week when I first arrived at university, was nerve-racking a bit because there was a lot of people but was also very exciting, there was so many different events going on, and now that I'm thinking about I remember the SU had daytime events and night-time events which I really liked because some people don't like going out at night, but they still want to network and meet people, so they had daytime events, and obviously had night-time events for people that like going out.

But I, one of the day when I went it, was like a friendship speed dating kind of thing I didn't know what to call it.

And you basically just meet random people you talk for like a minute, and then you move on to the next person, you talk for a minute, I thought that was really cool, and then they have, I think international students mixers, women mixes, postgrad mixers and like just different group mixers.

So for international students, it's good to like meet other international students, for postgrad it's good to meet other postgrads. I remember, they had events like that during Freshers' Week, and that was really cool.

Katie

That's great, especially if our students or listeners are a little bit nervous about making friends, Freshers' Week is the perfect opportunity and that speed dating friendship thing that you mentioned, that sounds really cool and a great way to meet some amazing people, so and throughout the year, so at Christmas and Easter, there are other events in the day and the evening that associate with that and, with that seasonal events so there's so much to take part in and a great way to have fun alongside your studies.

So thank you both, Timea and Rebecca, for your tips and advice today, we hope, our listeners have learned a little bit about what university life is like as a student, and how they can make the most of their own experience, including top tips for studying at university and taking part in the huge variety of opportunities that will be on offer at every university.

Remember, it's not just about studying and there are fun parts to it, too, which are just as important, as they can contribute to the development of your knowledge and your transferable skills to become a successful student and for the future as well.

Thank you again to our guests, and also our listeners for tuning in to this week's episode of life as a student!

Karina

If you have any questions, don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #UnderstandingUni or send an email to outreach@essex.ac.uk.

Additional resources will be posted on the website and sent to you via email if you're a registered listener, thank you for listening to today's episode! Don't forget to like and share with your family, friends and colleagues.