
Making yourself stand out: Interview & Career Tips

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 6**

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 programmes.

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 today, we'll be focusing on how to make yourself stand out, and when it comes to your future career, some of the hints and tips that we'll give you throughout this episode can also be used by our listeners now, whether it's for a part-time job that you're applying to for, or students or a university application that you're completing or maybe an apprenticeship for your dream career path.

We've got you covered .

So we briefly spoke about the number of opportunities that are available to you in our Exploring your Future Pathway episode including things like university, internships, career pathways and more.

So today, we'll sort of continue expanding on what you can do now and what to do once you've reached the stages of applying, being interviewed and how to do the most prior to reaching that point.

So today we have a guest speaker with us and that's Jasmine. Would you like to introduce yourself and explain what your current role is?

Jasmine:

Yes, hello Karina, hi Katie, my name's Jasmine. I currently work at the University of Essex.

My job title is Careers Information Advice and Events Manager which in a nutshell basically means I manage a team within our career centre who deliver information, advice and guidance to students at the University and I also run an events programme that we deliver that include some typical employability type events such as CVs, applications and I also run a lot of our career's fairs, so, sort of employer and recruitment fairs as well.

Karina:

That's brilliant, thank you so much for that and just wanted to ask for all of our sort of student listeners, what was your school life like and what was your college and sixth form experience, sort of the things that you studied, how you think you did? What was that like for you?

Jasmine:

I grew up locally and went to school reasonably locally to Colchester. I would have definitely described myself as a very average student, a very average teenager. I don't think I really kind of sort of started taking my studies seriously till kind of year eleven which in hindsight obviously would have liked to have started a little bit sooner. I managed to scrape through the five GCSE grade C and above which back in my day was kind of the essential to go into sixth form, so I actually stayed at my school sixth-form to study A-Levels.

I studied English Literature and Language combined, Sociology and Psychology and I was definitely one of those students who did quite well academically in the subjects that I enjoyed but not so well in the subjects that I didn't enjoy so I felt like my A-Level choice was really good for me because they were all subjects that I really enjoyed doing so I was quite hopeful that I would do quite well in them.

So, like I said, I stayed at my school sixth-form and I think I definitely feel like I came into my own a lot more in doing my A-Levels. I matured a lot more and I started to take my studies a lot seriously. I didn't really start thinking about university until definitely in my final year of A-Levels. I worked quite hard. I was actually living independently from my family as well. So, I was actually in a flat share quite young so, I was working really hard on a part-time job as well as keeping my studies down and then I decided quite late doors to go to university. I went through kind of university clearing. I'd also whilst doing my A-Levels, I'd considered options such as, not graduate schemes but essentially A-Level schemes.

So, I applied to university and I also applied for what was at the time the Arcadia group which was like a retail management programme and I kind of said to myself whatever kind of offer comes along first I will take it really. So, I applied for the Arcadia group. I got through to, there was a series of interviews, I got through to the final stage and this was about the same time I was starting to look at universities.

I looked at universities sort of around the local area as well as ones further afield and I was literally kind of going to university interviews as well as job interviews as well and I actually got accepted on a local university. It wasn't Essex, I might add but was reasonably local and then two weeks after that I actually got offered a job on the Arcadia Management programme, but I kind of thought to myself, sorry the offer for the University place came through first so, I took that. That was the kind of level of my decision making when I was eighteen, so I did end up going to university in the end.

Karina:

Wow, that's brilliant, thank you so much for that and I wanted to ask more about what was your sort of journey with jobs throughout your life to lead up to your current career right now. So, this could include anything from even your part-time jobs at school sort of, what are the sort of jobs that you went through throughout your life?

Jasmine:

So, like I said whilst I was doing my A-Levels I got myself a, I was working part-time from the age of sixteen really, started off doing waitressing and factory work and then I did quite a lot of retail work.

I had quite a stable retail job from the age of about 17 right through to university, working in the same kind of retail store right throughout university.

I then graduated university and didn't really know what I wanted to do. So, I did end up actually working first job that I went for after university, started looking for jobs around the time just after I finished my exams and got the first job that I went for, which was working for a large high street bank, and it was working within staff development.

I did that job for about a year and then it had always been my plan to go travelling. So, although I really loved that job, I decided to actually take a year out and go travelling so I went to Australia and Thailand and all those lovely places that you get to go to when you're taking a year out.

So again kind of came back from travelling, did a bit of temping for a bit, kind of had thought from my previous role at the bank that I would really enjoy that kind of staff development and recruitment side, those were the types of things I was looking for. And so did a bit of temping in things like recruitment agencies and that type of thing and then I actually saw an advert for a trainee Careers Adviser role and I remember thinking this is great job for me, because I never know what I wanted to do so this is a perfect job to be able to help other people, young people know what they want to do.

So I was still quite young at the time and applied for that job, got that job and that was working with local government working in sort of secondary schools and colleges and I worked as a Careers Adviser for about four years before leaving and I'd been doing some work as part of my role as Careers Adviser in a local FE College and I sort of made some contacts in that college and actually fancied a little bit of a career change.

So, I left being a Careers Adviser and went to work for an FE College and I worked as a worked and trained actually as a Basic Skills Literacy Tutor, so a little bit different but I really enjoyed working with that, kind of, older kind of A-Level, BTEC what it was, sort of client group. So, I trained as a Literacy Tutor, did that for a couple of years and then kind of took some time out, took a couple of years out to have some children and whilst I was out I really kind of reflected on my career actually and thought I just wasn't really enjoying that job teaching. It wasn't really for me. It was quite dry and actually really missed working in Careers, really miss that kind of self-development and that was kind of something that I was really interested in. So luckily for me whilst I was on maternity leave, I saw a vacancy here at the University of Essex to join the Careers team. It was quite a step back professionally for me from a salary point of view and it was coming in at, like I say more of a sort of entry level role than what I had been doing previously, but it was kind of part-time, it really suited my life at the time. So, I joined the Careers team here at the University of Essex as a Careers Information Coordinator, which was such a lovely job. It was working with obviously university students doing just the sort of thing that I'd missed doing, helping them kind of figure out what they want to do.

Doing sort of like events on CVs, giving CV advice, and helping them look for work. So, it was you know, really lovely job. Did that for about four years and then I was lucky enough to secure a promotion within our team here and I started a role of developing a employability award here at the University of Essex.

So, my job title then was Employability Award Coordinator, which again is a little bit of a random job title but what that was really was to set up something which we called the Big Essex Award here at Essex. Lots of universities have what they call kind of employability awards, they are essentially a mechanism by which students can recognise their extracurricular activities and achievements whilst they're at university.

So I had a great job setting that project up. It was really exciting. It was really ground-breaking breaking for Essex and I was really proud of what we kind of achieved with that award so I did that for about five years and then two years ago kind of felt like I'd taken that role as far as I could really so I again I was lucky enough to secure an internal promotion within the Careers team here at Essex and that's how I moved into my current

role. And so, like I say, I currently manage a team of careers professionals and so it's completely different to things like I've done before. Kind of best of both worlds for me in terms of I get to work with guys in my team who are delivering kind of careers 121 appointments and events so, I get to be involved in all the things that I'm passionate about but in terms of professional and personal development for me, I've been able to move into a management role so, I've got a whole new load of skills and experience I've developed as part of that as well so that's where I am now.

Katie:

Thank you so much for sharing that pathway. It just shows you have such an extensive experience which I hope will really help with our episode today, but also show to our listeners how varied your different jobs and roles that you do in your life can change which is fantastic. You mentioned earlier that you have previous experience working with school and college students and I was just wondering based on your previous experience. What would you recommend students of this age, who are still in school and college can prepare for their futures?

Jasmine:

I would say get as much experience as you can so obviously if you are, you know lucky enough to find yourself with a part-time work then obviously kind of take that opportunity up where you can. I know I've been there myself that a lot of the part-time jobs available to sort of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-olds, they're not the most exciting jobs and sometimes they are a little bit demotivating but when you come to university or applying for jobs it's then when you realise actually, I might not have enjoyed that job very much but look at the kind of skills and experience that I've got out of that to put on my CV, you have to start somewhere. If you know, you can't find a part-time job then there's always volunteering it's loads of volunteering opportunities out there and there's loads of resources where you can find sort of volunteering opportunities.

I think a lot of people get put off by volunteering opportunities because there are some opportunities that require quite a bit of commitment but there are also some sort of one-off things as well and it's like I say can just be a way to kind of meet new friends get involved in things and I think as well one of the things which people don't realise that you might already be doing things which would look really good on your CV or when you talk to an employer about so, you know things like doing sports coaching or doing any sort of church or community groups that type of thing if you're doing those things already, you're already kind of building your experience. One thing I think we give advice to sort of our university students on and I think the uni, that advice still stands, is to kind of talk to people as well talk to your, dare I say it, to your parents or you know friends of your parents or you know, your tutors at college and just talk to people and find out you know, where they've kind of come from, where they were going and you just when I summarised my experience and you know, you were kind of saying oh, you know, you know, it's really good and when I retell that back to you know, you guys it sounds like I've had it all sussed out and it sounds like oh, yeah it's a natural path and at no stage did I ever really, I kind of feel like I've drifted into things and I think that's quite reassuring for students to sort of realising, just kind of talking to people and building networks.

You never know again the whole thing about networking we really stress to our students how important it is to kind of get out there, get to know people things like joining LinkedIn sounds really kind of a little bit flat, a lot of people use it, it's a more of a professional

social media, but just kind of connecting with people you know on there and just kind of doing a little bit of you know, your research on, you know, social networks and professional network is a good start.

Katie:

Definitely and like you were mentioning earlier with the networking those that's where you're going to gain those skills by speaking to more people and experiencing different types of people as well.

So yeah, that's great and for students who are looking to go to university who want to know a bit more about this sort of area about how they can make the most of opportunities and prepare for the future who are the best people speak to, where do they need to go to?

Jasmine:

At university there's lots of different kinds of resources and things available in actual fact that when you first start university, it can be a bit overwhelming as to who do I talk to and where do I go? And the short answer is there's no kind of real wrong answer. Most universities have some kind of careers service, like what I work in and I think a big misconception about career services are you don't have to know what you want to do. You know numerous times we might have had people walking into our kind of careers resource area and almost be quite scared because they don't know where to start and it's you know, we can help, Career Services can help students with anything from completing a CV right through to graduate jobs, but just essentially just where to look for part-time work and if you're going away to study just looking at what is the part-time work like in the local area and so just kind of it doesn't have to be about what you want to do for your future. Most universities will have some kind of Students Union so, this would be an organisation that you know, was set up for students by students and run by students. These are a really great kind of network to get involved with, not only socially but for things like I mentioned before about sports clubs and societies, they also they kind of have their ear to the ground as well about kind of what's going on within the student community so, they tend to be looking at things like personal development, social development, housing and money issues so they can kind of really sort of be a first point of contact and a bit of a student friendly face.

You've also got resources within the department that you're studying so, for example at university I studied Sociology and I found obviously some of the tutors, lecturers within my degree sort of really useful stuff particularly with career related things as well and each kind of Department would usually have sort of a departmental Administration team which again can give you some sort of hints and tips around things around your course and your study and the basics of if you've lost something or you need to, you need to, you know, get some information or something on your course that can be a really good resource as well.

Most universities will have a really great library probably the hub of a lot of universities and I know I wish I'd definitely gone in my library more when I was a student cause I think you know, there's that sort of stereotypical image of sitting there with books and things but they really offer a lot more and some universities will offer things like academic skills writing classes and referencing workshops and webinars and things like that and it's things which you don't necessarily associate with a library that are on offer that can really kind of help a student, I think.

Karina:

Thank you very much for that was super super informative for our listeners and I think you gave some really really good advice So, on that sort of know of now, you know, the sort of skills and experiences and what the students have gained.

I think what some of our listeners might be struggling with is how to actually get it down on to a piece of paper and I know I definitely struggled when I had to write my first CV but luckily, I did get advice from my sort of family peers and teachers to help develop it further. So, for our listeners today, what sort of advice would you give them on, how do you actually get started in writing that CV?

Jasmine:

I would definitely advise you to start work on your CV as soon as possible. You'd be surprised at how many students that we see at university who come to university who haven't got a CV, so the sooner you can get one the better. Like you're saying, yeah, it's it's so difficult to get everything on paper and do it well and I would say it's probably one of the biggest things that students can do badly, but it's probably one of the easiest things to do well so, you know, in essence less is more in terms of structuring a CV. One of the kind of faux pas I would say is to have a CV that's too long. So, we always recommend either keep it to one page or two pages and that might depend on how much of the information you've got to put on there.

But you know steer clear if you're finding your contents on a page and a half for example try and kind of look at ways that you can either pad that out or reduce that down. Generic advice usually when you're using a CV for a UK market we like things in the UK quite bland and basic so no kind of crazy fonts or coloured paper or anything that you know that you might think oh, that looks really kind of attractive. So, keep it quite basic, nice basic font and essential kind of sections on there really is looking at your education history, employment or work experience history and then obviously your personal details. They're the three main things that you need to include on there, anything else we say is really an optional. So, if you want to add a section on extracurricular activities, or you want to add an extra section on skills, that's completely up to you. Key advice that we always say is to sort of tailor your CV for every different job you're going to and I would say you possibly don't need to do that if you're just looking for part-time work, but you might have a, well this is my part time work CV, and you use that and it's kind of tailored to the types of part-time work that you might be looking for. You might have a separate CV that you're using for if you're looking for a particular work placement or an internship that's related to your kind of course or sort of area of interest. So, it's really about you kind of using that CV for the best kind of possible outcome basically. One of the things that we often recommend is to look at how you kind of demonstrate your skills and experience on there. So rather than just kind of lists, you know, listing your jobs and kind of saying I don't know, my last job was at KFC and I currently work at Waitrose and you just kind of, a lot of people make the mistake of writing their duties down or for roles like that it's reasonably obvious what you've done if you've worked at Waitrose, if you've been on the checkout or you've been stacking shelves. So rather than list the kind of job description, list the kind of skills and experience that you've been developing out of there so that would be things like teamwork, communication skills dealing with difficult customers, those types of things. So it's about pulling out the things that the employer would you know recognise and be looking for.

Karina:

Thank you very much for that and I just wanted to quickly ask, you mentioned to keep CVs nice and short straight to the point sort of thing. I know that a lot of our listeners who are students may have experience of working in quite a few part-time jobs so, what would be your advice for sort of cutting that down, what would you recommend?

Jasmine:

If you've got a lot of experience then obviously you're in a really great position to be in anyway, so this is kind of one of the things that we would say great if you've got loads of experience. What it's probably worth doing particular if it's quite similar, so you've worked in three pubs over the last year or whatever is literally to keep your work experience section reasonably factual so you're just listing the date and you list the name of the company that that you've worked at. So, you're literally kind of listing them on one line and in that situation it's probably best if you were to add what we call kind of a skill section where you really kind of pad out the skills that you've developed so it could be across all the roles that you've had. There are some standout 4,5,6 key skills that you can develop so it's about keeping the actual employment history brief, sort of one line per job and then padding out the skills section to demonstrate what skills you've developed from those roles collectively.

Karina:

That's brilliant, thank you so much and one last question in regards to CVs is what are the sort of most important aspects of a good cover letter?
I know that that's something that's asked quite often so, what would you recommend?

Jasmine:

So, we would always say that a lot of recruiters will ask for a cover letter with a CV. So, if they ask for it definitely include one, you'd be surprised how many people don't and also, we'd also advise that even if a recruiter doesn't ask for a cover letter we would say include one anyway, and we would call that a speculative letter. So even if they haven't asked one, include one anyway again, the key is to keeping it reasonably short. I would say sort of a page is probably sufficient and this is really where it's the part which I think a lot of students tend to worry about the most, but I think it's actually the easiest bit because it's where you kind of get to be you a little bit more. So, if you think of your CV as being a real kind of factual document, here's me, here's what I've done, here's what I'm doing currently. The cover letter really stands to be a little bit more motivational so the types of things would expect you to cover in that would be why you're applying for the role, summary of your skills and experience that you can offer an employer and then just some generic tips which you can kind of find online about how to sort of open and close the paragraphs and stating things like when you'd be available for an interview and that types of things but in essence it's really about kind of covering your motivation for the role and a brief summary of the skills and experience. If there's anything that you haven't been able to elaborate on in the CV because like I say, you've kept that quite short the cover letter can be a way where you can expand on that a little bit more, so you don't lose any of the content that you've had to kind of condense a bit in the CV.

Karina:

Thank you very much for that so now that let's say our listeners have now followed all of these steps and now, they're moving into next stage which would be the interview. So, what are the sort of things you'd recommend to sort of prepare for an interview beforehand and then the do's and don'ts whilst you're at the interview?

Jasmine:

One of the biggest sort of bits of feedback that we often get from employers that that we work with is to never underestimate the importance of commercial awareness. So, what this really means is about sort of knowing the job you're applying for, knowing the company that you're applying for which sounds a bit silly if this is just like I say a part-time job in in KFC or something, but it's really about knowing the role that you're applying for and sort of being comfortable with that. Any research you can do on the company, having a look at their website, the preparation for the interview is probably the biggest thing. I would also say one of my best advice would be to research and practice interview questions because interview questions once you've kind of got used to what an interview question is, you can practise those, you can pre-empt what an employer is going to ask you and really interviewers will use a set of questions. So, they're usually one of three questions we call them competency-based questions, scenario questions and behavioural questions. So next time you've got a spare half an hour give those a bit of a Google and a research and what they really do is allow you to get your skills and experience and structure your answers to kind of fit those kinds of patterns in an interview. So, you say you can prepare and practice that as much as possible. I think as well one of the worst things about an interview is obviously nerves and a couple of tips would say to help with nerves is always going into interview thinking this is your opportunity to get to know the recruiter and to find out about the job. It's it doesn't feel like it I know but it's your opportunity to almost interview them so, don't be afraid to ask them questions and a little tip in terms of nerves, I've definitely used this in interview myself is when you're obviously sitting there and answering questions and you have that thing where your mind goes all blank and you know, you start talking and waffling and you're not quite sure whether you've covered everything, never be afraid to kind of say, I'm sorry could you repeat the question again, please? or does that make sense? You know was I, was that on topic? So it's just about sort of double-checking. It kind of gives you a little bit of a second chance if you do feel you haven't answered the question properly or if you haven't, you know, kind of covered it, it kind of gives you a little bit more of a second chance and it builds up a rapport with an employer as well so, it can make you come across quite well. I think there were some kind of generic advice but don't underestimate the basics like I've said before things like, you know a nice handshake, eye contact, dressing well, being sort of polite and you know being friendly and approachable. These really do sound like the basics, but you'll be surprised at how well you come across at an interview just by kind of being relaxed and personable.

Katie: Thank you, that is some really great advice which will hopefully prepare our listeners for the future. I also just want to say a massive thank you to you Jasmine for joining us today, it's been really great to hear about your own pathway, but thank you also for those great tips on how to be a stand out student, how to write a brilliant CV and how to perform well in an interview. Thank you so much again.

Karina:

If you have any questions, don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #understandinguni or send us an email to outreach@essex.ac.uk. Additional resources will be posted on our 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.