
Preparing for Higher Education

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 18**

Katie:

Welcome to Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni Podcast.

My name is Katie and I work for the University of Essex Outreach Team helping to deliver activities and events to support students and guide them on their higher education journeys. The outreach team believe that all students, regardless of their background, education or where they come from, should have an equal opportunity to discover whether Higher Education could be part of their future. Our podcast is designed to give listeners an insight into university life, including the journey before, during and after, dispel some of the myths out there and also motivate and excite you to achieve your potential.

If you'd like to know more or have any questions, please contact us by emailing outreach@essex.ac.uk

Here at Essex, we have been looking at ways to help students in years 10-13 whilst they navigate through their big decisions and next steps. Staff across the university have collaborated to produce two online courses for students to explore in their own time, one for Years 10-11 and one for Years 12-13. These courses aim to provide the confidence boost that student need to succeed. Today, I'll be sharing more details about the preparation programmes, explain how you and your friends can enrol and other ways you can prepare for higher education.

Featuring in the episode, we have Sean Duffy, head of our VI6 Project at the University, who also teaches locally, to students in years 7-11. The VI6 project is a fantastic initiative that works in collaboration with the University and a number of local schools. Students come along once a week, on a Monday to study their A Levels and this is to help support minority subjects so that schools can offer a wider variety of classes including History, Law and Spanish. It's to ensure that students who are keen to move into higher education, get as much experience as possible and being at the University once a week really helps with this. Sean oversees this project and ensures that the students get the best form of education that they can and that the teachers are enjoying the experience of delivering at the university.

We'll also hear from Erin, who is in year 13 at a local college and is studying English Literature, Criminology and Law A Levels. Erin is part of the VI6 project, so comes to the University to study her Law A Level and hopes one day to go to university to study either Politics and International Relations or English Literature. Erin has been exploring a variety of universities, visiting the areas, and is looking forward to going to more Open Days. One of the advantages of the VI6 project is that Erin gets to experience what life would be like studying at the University every week!

I had a chat with Sean and Erin about what student life has been like for the past few years and the pros and cons of the pandemic. In light of this, I asked Sean what he'd like his students in years 12-13 to be actively doing to help with their next steps...

Sean

Well, I think we're at a massive advantage now, being here at the university because I think, you know what we know is that success breeds success and when you're constantly surrounded by, then you come here you're surrounded by lots of aspiring successful people and that's what you're seeing day to day, I think that experience like really to take all of that in. And some of the things that we've been looking at in the last couple of weeks is to encourage students to look outside of their curriculum. So, reading nonfiction texts and articles around their subject and to get involved in anything that is an enriching experience. So instead of fixating on and it's probably sounds probably quite counterproductive for a teacher to be saying, instead of focusing solely on the content that you have to cover for your subjects actually you know, to read around your subject to think outside of your curriculum. And actually, to become a part of the world that you're looking to become a part of in the future. So, for instance, if you're studying Law, you know read around Law, find out what's going on in the world about Law, don't just fixate on what is in the curriculum. That goes for every single one of our subjects. Start to become a part of that world. So yeah, it's that, instead of saying do more homework and you know more hours of independent learning, which all has its place, I would say, try to become, yeah, try to embed yourself in into the world of which what you're studying.

Katie

I love that because I feel that potentially a lot of students might be putting a lot of pressure on themselves to try and catch up in a way or feel like they because of things that they've missed out on, they're like I need to learn all these things. But actually, to do what you've just been talking about is fantastic because, it

helps you to sort of think about the things that you really do enjoy and takes that overall pressure of thinking about what are your next steps, what are you're going to do in the future. Because it should become natural to you if you if that's something you are really passionate about, you shouldn't be thinking oh, what do I need to be doing in the next few years? No, just do some extra reading, do things you enjoy, and you might find that by listening to something or reading something you think oh that's interesting. I really like the idea of that, and then you go on to further research to see how do you get there, what are the next steps, what do you need to be doing more to get there? So, yeah, I love that I love that that's what you guys have been doing. The other thing that I wanted to mention as well a positive that's come out of sort of online learning is obviously the online work opportunities as well. If it's whether you need work experience or anything like that, we've got obviously things online now to help you secure those opportunities. Erin, have you had any or seen any of those or been part of any of those sorts of things?

Erin

There was a lot of ones that I looked into over the summer, but I did not actually do one, which I do regret. I think maybe in the summer between college and university I might do one. I think it looks like a really good opportunity.

Katie

Yeah, absolutely because if you've not got the time or the money to travel and things like that, you've still got access to quite a few things. Which actually leads me onto my next part of our sort of conversation today, because we, at the university have developed these online programmes, which I know both you of had a chance to look at and explore yourselves, which is really fantastic.

But these are some of the things that students can be doing to, not only improve their confidence and skills, that they may have felt they have, sort of missed out on the last couple of years. But just to help with their next step, whether it's going to college or sixth form, or maybe you are thinking about going to university and it might help you to think about those things or improve areas that you feel you may have missed out on. Alongside those other universities, other websites like UCAS, have so many resources and even if you're listening to this podcast right now that's again another thing that's really going to help you think about your next steps, or just provide you with those sorts of tips and guidance for the things that you need to think about.

So, yes let's have a little chat about these programmes then. So, Erin, I asked you to take a look at our university preparation programme which is for students in years 12-13. I would just like you to briefly explain to our listeners, a little bit about the programme and maybe perhaps what you did.

Erin

Okay, so I started with the university preparation like the transitioning one. And the first thing I did actually watch was a Student Ambassador video, which was so valuable to me because I was finally seeing people at uni talk about what it was like to go to uni. And that's what I really felt like I've been missing, just people saying you know it really was tough, but it was fine. And that was really nice and then, as I carried on, there was some like quizzes, kind of like myth or fact quizzes, stuff about uni, like if you miss one lesson you're going to fail. And even though I knew, in my mind, I of course I wouldn't fail if I didn't go to one lesson, it was really nice to see a little paragraph saying, you know it's okay to miss a lesson here and there, as long as you keep on top of with the degree itself. That was really nice. There was a longer activity which I had some technical difficulties didn't actually get to look at. But everything outside of that, it was really nice just to see people talk about the transition and how although it is big and scary, it's actually really doable and there are lots of things you can do to help you cope with that.

Katie

Yeah! Thank you, Erin! So, the preparation programme is made of sort of six modules that you can do in your own time and Erin was exploring one of them, and they're all built out of sort of recorded presentations so like mini lectures delivered by our students and staff at the University. There's games on there, like the fact or fiction one, you were just talking about. And just lots of little things associated with that module and I think you said you were looking at the transition to university one, yes?

Erin

Yes!

Katie

There are ones on there for the student finance, you get a better understanding what that is and how to budget your money. And we also have a preparation programme for students in years 10-11. Which focuses more on that transition to sixth form or college. And we have things on there, like, how to, skills and preparation for communications and making friends. And, what else have we got on there? We've also got some budgeting advice on there, so you can start thinking about that much sooner rather than later, as it is a common worry amongst students. And I think with the years 12- 13 one as well, we've got bits in there for preparing you to write an academic argument, so that might be something that you might want to improve on your academic writing abilities, if that's a skill that, perhaps in the past year hasn't been something that you've been able to focus on, and so the module will aim to further support you with that and I think from the sounds of it, it is an enjoyable experience.

Erin

Very! It was useful. I looked at the finance one and then you got to make your own shopping list, and then I went on the Tesco website and I kind of put in my own like values and stuff and a food shop is actually a lot cheaper than my parents have made it out to be.

Katie

Yeah

Erin

So that was very nice to me, because I looked at student finance and was like I am not going to be able to afford to live, but it wasn't that bad. It was very like illuminating really.

Katie

Yeah, that's and that's exactly what we wanted to sort of achieve from this. To help you realise, especially with the budgeting one, if you didn't know how that's how sort of cheap, I guess your food shop was going to be, then that helps to maybe feel like it is a little more realistic, that you could afford to do that, which is great! Have you had to do a food shop before? Or is that your first experience on the Tesco's website?

Erin

I honestly because I still live with my parents, sometimes I'll buy stuff for one meal, but then it's normally like one really big meal so it is quite expensive. So, I thought every meal that you buy has to be like seven pounds it was quite good to see that isn't actually the case.

Katie

Yeah, yeah! Because obviously you can cook a big meal and then those portions wouldn't necessarily be shared amongst your family, you could put them in the freezer and then have another time. So that money would be spent more across those meals, which is really, really, really good.

Yeah, fantastic that you've been able to experience that. And is, that something that you would perhaps, do again or would you try out more of the modules?

Erin

One hundred percent the ones I looked at were really good. I'd like to go back in and do some more of, like you said, there was an academic writing one. I'd like to try that because I haven't written many essays in the last year. I'd like to go back in there for that, and I would definitely recommend if you're worried about money and going to uni. I'd recommend trying out the finances ones. Looking at other people there's, like examples of shopping lists.

Katie

Yeah

Erin

It's really nice to see that actually it's not that bad, it's not that expensive and it's not scary. So, I would recommend that because I was terrified about money, I would recommend that to anyone else who is.

Katie

Yeah, thank you Erin! That's really lovely for you to say as well. And yeah, it never hurts to do those sorts of things to try it out and, like I mentioned earlier it's something you can do in your own time, you can come back to it any stage as well, you can do one or more modules. And, at the end of it, if you complete all six modules you receive a certificate. These sorts of things you could share within your personal statement, if

you're applying for university, or a CV or a job. To show that you're putting in extra time and effort into extracurricular activities. So yeah really, really fantastic. I know you said earlier, as well about there was a student ambassador part to it, where a student ambassador was talking to you and you feel like talking to a student ambassador, one of the most valuable things. We offer a live chat service, with our student ambassadors at the University, so if you have any questions, perhaps it's a subject specific question, you can find a student on our platform that studies, maybe a subject that you're interested in. And ask them questions about anything really and they get back to you in when they're free.

But I think it's so important to speak to students at a university, because they're the ones studying, they're the ones experiencing the student life, because it changes year to year. Your teachers are obviously really good people to go to speak about these things, because they'll have gone to university, but that would have been a few years ago. So, it's really, yeah, it's really key that you get that student interaction. Yeah, thank you for taking part in the programme Erin and I look forward to hearing your feedback once you've completed a few more modules. It's really great.

And so, Sean, I would now like to ask you a few questions from a teacher perspective, because I know that you've had a little overview of both of the programmes, and I just wanted to know your thoughts.

Sean

Well, I would liken it to in terms of taking part in the programme is, if you enter a race with ten other people, and you have the opportunity to start halfway round the track, you are definitely going to win the race. Even if it's fast people you're in race with, and this, is what this is, a head start. Instead of turning up on the first day of university hoping for the best and learning as you go, which is all you know fine to a degree.

This gives you such a head start in terms of your understanding, your preparation and I would be very, very surprised for someone to take part in one of these programmes and to not feel much, much more prepared by the time they start university. As a teacher, it's easy to see the benefits but actually I have found myself, as I was going though, to reflect on my own experiences as many years as they may have been ago, and the thought of wishing that we had had the same opportunities. Erin touched on it in, in what she was saying terms of finances, there was two parts, in particular, that I found particularly beneficial. And somewhat surprising, in fact, in one way in one of them was to financial elements of it, I think one of the biggest fears for young people, particularly for many of our students who come from largely deprived areas, and you know essentially families that are not, you know, not financially flush and I certainly came from a family that wasn't wealthy. And it can be a massive put off, if you're worried about how much money you'll end up owing at the end of your degree. This programme really helps alleviate some of those worries, not just from showing you that perhaps things aren't as expensive as you think that they may be, but also, and the realisation that if you end up having to pay back one hundred, two or three hundred pounds a month to your student loans one day, that's such a great thing, because it means that you're financially doing very well.

Katie

Yes, yep!

Sean

The more you're paying back, the more money you are earning and hopefully the more money you're earning in a career that that you really enjoy, because you've gone to university and you've got a qualification in the areas that you need or want so that you can enter that successful career. So, the financial side, in particular, particularly for many of our students is so beneficial, because I think you end up finishing that programme, having very little concern over finances. And the other one that I found so refreshing, was the parts about preparing for future careers and interviews and those sorts of things. Because it is almost jumping ahead isn't? It's almost looking beyond university and preparing you for those things so in terms of getting a head start, I mean there's not a better way. It spoke through how to come across well in the interview, how to stand out amongst other candidates, those sorts of things. And it's come from people that really know what they're talking about and what's interesting about being at University on a Monday and going around campus and there's a number of restaurants and cafes and things like that, and at any point during the day, if you go to one of these cafes, and if you are there for 10 minutes, you will almost most definitely see someone being in the interviewed for something. And it's quite interesting from a people watching perspective. And what you see are people that are particularly well prepared and some people that are less prepared and not really for any fault of their own, but perhaps just not having the right advice. And if you enter one these programmes, which are free

Katie

Yeah.

Sean

To access,

Katie

Absolutely!

Sean

And it's a remarkable way to get ahead start in such a way that, it's a bit like cheating isn't it, you know, in the best way possible.

Katie

Yeah.

Sean

In the in the best way possible, because you're been given advice and information from the people that you're going to be sitting in front of hoping to get careers from or jobs from people that have experienced the same things that you're experiencing. Yeah, I mean why wouldn't you.

Katie

Yeah, thank you Sean that's really, really lovely for you to say as well, because obviously we've created these programmes with those intentions, but from to hear it from you as well, to see the value in what we're trying to do is really great, and we hope that more and more students and more teachers will become aware of it and will enrol on these sorts of things. Because there are other opportunities as well to gain those sorts of skills, like I mentioned earlier, with online work opportunities and things, but this is so, specific to preparing for your next steps that it would be silly not to. It is probably just as important, as that future research that you would do when you're looking for a job and other things like that. So yeah, I'm glad that you that you really enjoyed looking at those and hopefully they'll be really helpful for other students as well, and from a teacher perspective, then, how do you think we can incorporate these into the curriculum?

Sean

Well, one of the things I was going say was, it is quite empowering experience I can imagine for young people, because what we often get, or what young people often get, when they're in college is they get their pastoral leaders and their teachers, providing them with all this information, whatever it might be whether its financial advice or how to write a personal statement, how to prepare for university, how to pick a course, all those sorts of things. But you are in a room with lots of the same sort of people and sometimes I think it can feel quite regurgitated, that this is the same boring information that's relayed, week in week, month after month. But this independent element of it is, I'm going to take responsibility for myself. And actually, from our perspective, as people that are people working with these young people, this is really for us an opportunity to say look what's available for you and almost that question, saying again, look this is a head start, do it if you want to.

Katie

Yeah.

Sean

And putting the responsibility on the young person, and I think we find a lot more success that way. Rather than saying, right you are all sitting in a hall now for an hour to talk to you about how to prepare for university

Katie

Yeah.

Sean

So yeah, I think really it is making them aware.

Katie

Yeah and I think we do have an independent study module in the programme so if that's not something you're very good at use the programme to help you to do that, so that you can continue with the modules as well and I think that's probably why you're not taught in school, how to buy food on a budget or how to set off a washing machine, because those are things that as an individual, you should sort of investigate those things to help you to become an adult and to get those skills. But if you do need a little bit of help and a little bit of support, speak to your friends, speak to your family. But also, our preparation programme will help you with that as well. And for the programme that's aimed at students in years 10- 11, there's a whole section on useful life skills with things like that and they got little cooking tutorials in there to help you start cooking meals. And obviously Erin mentioned earlier that sometimes she does the food shop for her family but there'll be situations where people have never bought food or cooked anything before, they've come to university, so I think these sorts of things that can minimise your worries as well if it's something that you're worried about. So, yeah thank you both for coming on to the podcast today's talk, to talk about the programmes. It's been lovely to hear it from your perspective, how you've found them.

I just want to sort of finish up with today with maybe some final thoughts about tips, maybe we can think about in preparation for the next few years. I also just wanted to mention Erin because I know you said about personal statements earlier. There's a module on personal statements in the university preparation programme as well to help you write that perfect statement when applying for university so that might be something very beneficial for you indeed.

Erin

I'm stuck on the last paragraph, so I might actually tune in and see if I can come up some with some more ideas.

Katie

Yeah, absolutely! I would definitely make the most of any sort of free opportunities and always remember to include them in your applications, whether it's for a job or for university. To say look hey I've put in extra time to do this programme and I've learned this from it and it's been a great experience because what's better than sort of working hard and putting in extra time for these things. It's really important. So yeah, let's finish up them with maybe something, a final piece of advice or something that you've taken from this programme.

Erin

I would say if you're worrying about uni, either go on the university preparation programme or YouTube or literally anywhere and just find out what students are saying, because you can hear it from the University website, you can hear it from your teachers but hearing it come from an actual student about how it is not actually that bad, is the biggest relief ever and that took a weight off my shoulders.

Katie

Yeah, aww that's really lovely! Thank you, Erin.
And Sean?

Sean

I think there's lots of examples you could draw upon, and perhaps some more cliché than others. But if you consider how you tried to or how do you get better something. Let's say you are playing lots of football manager and you're not very good at it and you want to get better at football manager. You might religiously listen to the football manager podcast and guaranteed after listening to many episodes you are going to be better at it and so, if you can imagine that you're trying to become more prepared, you're trying to become a better student then take part in this programmes, listen to these podcasts and guaranteed you're going to reap the rewards of that head start.

Katie

Yeah, and those are just some of the things you can do before coming onto campus for an Open Day to view the facilities, speak to students and staff and find out even more. Thank you both so much for joining today and sharing your thoughts and experience of our preparation programmes.

Sean

Thank you

Erin

Thankyou

Katie

Thank you for listening to today's episode. If you want to listen to more, our previous episodes are available on the playlist, and you can keep an eye out for new releases by making sure you're a registered listener. Please email us on outreach@essex.ac.uk to find out more.

We've recently launched a variety of fantastic online courses for students to support their transition, independence, and a variety of skills at such an important time in their lives. Made up of short videos, interactive activities and resources, the modules aim to provide students with the confidence to succeed. Our courses include the Further Studies Preparation Programme for students in years 10-11, University Preparation Programme for students in years 12-13 and Essex Preparation Programme for those about to embark on their journey here at Essex. Head to essex.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges to enrol today.

Thanks again and don't forget to share the episode with your family, friends, and colleagues.