

Career Counsellor's Newsletter



No regrets: How to choose the right subject to study at university



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Nine out of 10 graduates would choose to do an undergraduate degree again if they could, with just one in 10 saying they would choose not to go to university if they had their time again. Around half of the graduates say they would choose the same subject. But... four in 10 say they would prefer to study a different subject. This is according to recent research by the Policy Institute at King's College London.

Now, the intention is not to scaremonger about this topic and throw you all into doubt about your choices – after all, nearly 90% of graduates felt their time at university was worthwhile enough that they would do it all over again. But these figures are concerning enough to suggest that either there is a mismatch between what many students are expecting from their degree and what they are getting, OR students are not making fully informed decisions about their choice of course.

So, how do you go about choosing the right subject to take so that you don't end up as one of the four in 10 who wish they had studied something else, or worse still, one of the one in 10 who wish they hadn't gone to university at all?

Well, below are three ideas for you that I hope might help:

1) JUST DO IT!

This idea comes not from the American sports brand with the swoosh logo, but from Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl.

“Want to be a musician?” he says “Then just play!”.

And by extension, whatever you are thinking of studying, just try doing it, now.

Say you are thinking of studying Law, but haven't studied it before. Don't just read the university websites and look at the course outlines. Get down to your library, pick up a legal textbook and actually study it. Do you find it interesting? Do you want to read more? If the answers are yes, great. If not, then you have just learnt something really important; Law is not for you!

And it's not just books! You will find a whole load of online and in-person subject tasters on Springpod and UniTasterDays. These will give you real insight into what it's like to study a whole range of different subjects at university.

2. Check out what potential careers there are for your subject

The Prospects website has a fantastic resource available called [What can I do with my degree?](#)

You can look up almost any subject and see the sorts of jobs the subject can prepare you for, the sorts of skills that studying that subject will give you, and what type of work graduates of that subject actually do after graduation.

Now... reports, statistics and data do not tell you what your future will hold. Your interests, your priorities and the choices you make will determine whether you go on and follow what others have done, or whether you forge a completely different path.

However, by looking at this type of information, you can go into your studies with your eyes wide open, and with a realistic idea of what might be possible for you after you graduate. Those who go to university with realistic expectations, and their eyes wide open are far less likely to have regrets than those who don't.

3. IKIGAI

Ikigai is the Japanese for "life's value", or "life's worth", and if you have found your ikigai, it means that you've found your purpose in life. In the west we aren't particularly good at articulating these sorts of things, but in 2014 a fella called Marc Winn took a standard careers venn diagram and stuck the word Ikigai in the middle of it.

It looks something like this:



If you currently have an idea of the type of career you would like to pursue, and are choosing a specific subject to study at university in order to get into that career, this diagram is a great way of checking whether you are making a good choice.

- Is the subject something you love doing and learning about?
- Is it something that you are good at?
- Could it lead to something that you can be paid for?
- And is it something that the world actually needs?

If the answer to each of these questions is 'yes' then you could be on to a good thing.

For more about this, have a look at:

Ikigai. Something we can learn from Japanese philosophy?

Of course, once you have an idea of what subject you want to study, there is a whole lot more that you can do to make sure you find the right course and university for you:

- Check the course details for things like assessment methods, work placements and study abroad options
- Go to Open Days
- Chat to students using platforms like Unibuddy
- Check student reviews on Uni Compare, Whatuni etc.

All of these things can help you find the subject and the specific course that is right for you, and help minimize the chance of you regretting your choices a few years down the line!

What universities really want to see in your applications

These three things can elevate your application from good to great

To get into your ideal course at your ideal institution, an international student needs more than good grades. The people in charge of reviewing university applications will sift through hundreds, sometimes thousands of personal statements, so it's important to make yours stand out.

So how do you create a high-quality personal statement that makes you the obvious choice for your institution?

Your academic achievements should comprise about 70 per cent of your overall statement. That leaves 30 per cent to demonstrate who you are outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities are a part of this but “supercurricular” activities which highlight how you have engaged intellectually with your subject area outside school are even better. With this in mind, here are three key areas to focus on if you want to get into your first choice of university.

1. Extra reading

The first thing to do is show that you are interested in your chosen subject beyond what you are learning at college or school.

An excellent way to demonstrate your intellectual curiosity and your willingness to engage with the material on your particular course is to look at the reading lists published online. These will often be available on your target university's website.

You should also make an effort to read widely discussed works in your chosen field: a would-be evolutionary biologist should aim to read *On the Origin of Species*; if you're looking to study modernist literature, you should aim to read *Ulysses* and *To the Lighthouse*. Beyond this reading, look for critical perspectives (supporting, opposed, or mixed) on the relevant works to get a sense of the conversations happening in your area of study. It's helpful to your application, and it gives you a better idea of how you could contribute to them.

Subscribing to relevant magazines and journals can also help: if you're studying politics, for example, you should be reading the New Statesman and The Spectator alongside your history books and newspapers. Stay up to date, stay informed, and you can't go far wrong.

2. Participation and collaboration

Of course, reading is only one part of the equation. Your personal statement should also suggest that you are enthusiastic and willing to participate in your chosen field, not just learn about it.

An excellent way to do that is to visit museums, exhibitions and other points of interest. If you're looking to study modern foreign languages, you could go to the country where your chosen language is spoken; if you intend to study architecture, you should visit significant buildings and landmarks. Demonstrate your passion: don't just tell them about it.

Another easy way to do that is to join a society or club relevant to your prospective degree: law students should join the debating team; Model United Nations is great for students looking to enroll in philosophy, politics and economics or international relations. Equally, attending lectures is another way to stand out at the application stage. Find out if your school or college holds talks or research some in your local area.

3. Self-development

Finally, universities want to see that you're a self-starter. Taking a massive open online course (MOOC) can highlight that you are serious about studying and will often come with a certificate once you've completed it. This small time commitment can improve your personal statement.

Otherwise, consider entering competitions to prove your capability against other students. Take part in a maths olympiad or an essay competition and you'll stand out from the rest.

For international students, it can often be challenging to complete a personal statement. Getting your English language levels to the required standard and maintaining excellent grades can be challenging enough, without considering the above extracurriculars. In addition, some international students come from cultures where challenging key ideas is uncommon, and they may be less willing to participate in debates or activities that involve public speaking.

Life after UCAS: What comes next in UK university applications?



Most of the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) burden is now off your shoulders, so this breakdown guides you through what to expect from the next eight months as you await university offers, decisions, exam results and clearing opportunities.

UCAS applications are (finally) over for this year. While early birds may have seen their offers rolling in already, the rest of you have some waiting ahead.

If you have been so wrapped up in the application that you haven't even thought about the next steps, this breakdown of what to expect will add a little structure to your next few months.

January–March: University offers

Most universities evaluate applications as they arrive, even before the deadline. Typically, they will reply with an offer or an invitation to an interview within two weeks of receiving your application.

However, if you hit “Submit” on deadline day, chances are your application is caught up in the flurry of last-minute applications, so it might take a little longer.

Other universities don't start processing applications until the January deadline has passed and won't make offers until all interviews have been conducted. If that's the case, don't hold your breath for the next couple of weeks – it could take until the end of March, the date that UCAS suggests as the offer deadline.

However, the absolute deadline for offers to be made is not until 5 May 2016. By that point, UCAS will consider any pending applications to be unsuccessful.

The offers that you receive are either conditional on your achieving certain grades, or they are unconditional – more common for people who are applying after already taking their exams. Conditional offers will specify a minimum number of UCAS points that you must achieve overall or A-level (or equivalent) grades in certain subjects or in any combination.

January–March: Interviews

Not all courses or universities will want to interview you before making an offer, but if you are invited to one, it should show up in your UCAS Track, with a suggested date and time. If you need to request a different appointment, it's best to contact the university or course admissions administrator directly, and they can update it formally in the UCAS system.

Interviews are common for arts or performance courses, where you will present your portfolio or audition. At the other end of the spectrum, many science degrees will also call candidates to interview to test their problem-solving and mathematical skills. Sometimes these interviews are more like workshops, where a number of candidates will sit in a classroom and discuss problems together.

Even in these group settings, it's likely that a tutor will interview you personally, using your application as a guide. You should be prepared to back up and explain anything you have written in your personal statement, expect to discuss books or topics you have mentioned, and be ready to chat about any recent developments in your area of interest.

These interviews are also an opportunity for the university to convince you that it is the right place for you to study. The tutors might give you a better idea of what classes are actually like, and will answer any questions you have, so be sure to bring along any queries.

January–May: Your decisions

At some point, before March, you will receive all the offers. At this stage, the tables turn and you get to choose which university you want to accept as a “firm” choice and which one you select as an insurance, in case you do not achieve the requirements of your first-choice offer.

It might seem obvious, but do ensure that your insurance offer requires lower grades or fewer UCAS points than your firm offer. If you make the grades of your firm offer, you will have a place at your top choice. If you don't make the grades but you do meet the requirements of your insurance, you will have a place at this university. You can't (easily) switch to take up the place at your insurance university if you make the grades for your firm choice, so you should use the insurance decision only as a back-up.

You must decline all other offers. If you receive an unconditional offer and you accept it, you immediately have a place on that course and you will be expected to attend, save for exceptional circumstances.

UCAS will set you a deadline by which you must reply to your offers. This will depend on when you receive your last offer, but you will generally have between one and five weeks to make your decision.

July–August: Exam results

Results day doesn't just reveal the fruits of your labours of the past few years, it also determines your future for the following few years. No pressure.

Chances are, before you've even rolled out of bed (unless the nerves kept you up), UCAS Track will have already changed to reflect whether you have met the conditions for your offers. If you are taking exams through bodies that don't send results to UCAS, you will have to collect the results personally and send them on to your chosen university.

If you meet the requirements of either your firm or your insurance offer, the online UCAS status will change to show that your university place is confirmed. For you, the UCAS journey is more or less over. However, a university may offer you a place on an alternative course, either because your grades were higher or lower than expected, or simply because places unexpectedly opened up. It is your choice to accept or decline this new offer.

Students who achieve much better results than they expected are often contacted immediately on results day by universities that want you to take a place on their course. These will likely be universities with fairly high entry requirements that couldn't originally make you an offer based on your predicted grades. So if you excel in your exams, you may find that universities that you were not originally eligible for are fighting it out to convince you to come on their course.

July–September: Clearing

Even if you don't make the grades for your chosen universities, or if you achieve higher grades than your offer, you can shop around for available courses that match your exam results.

Clearing is open from July until September, and vacancies are updated regularly as other students accept and decline offers.



AI Tool Suggestion: Perplexity AI: The Citable Research Engine



Best for: Writing research papers, fact-checking, and finding credible sources.

Perplexity AI gives you answers with sources. This makes it a crucial tool for academic work where citations are mandatory. It bridges the gap between a chatbot and a traditional search engine.

- 1) Provides concise, accurate answers with direct citations.
- 2) Ideal for finding credible online sources for an assignment.
- 3) Helps you write factual, well-supported academic content.

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