

How to choose the right university for you

Your choice of university will affect your life socially and professionally, so it's important to make a wise decision. William Ham Bevan has some tips.

How to choose your degree: there has been a rise in popularity for accelerated degree programmes that cram three years' study into two. Photo: Corbis

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By William Ham Bevan

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When choosing a university, bear one thing in mind: it's not all academic. As well as finding a course that matches your interests, think carefully about the whole student experience and whether it will suit you. If you don't like your surroundings or the educational culture of a place, remember that you will have to put up with them for three years or more.

Britain's universities and colleges are hugely diverse, but for many people the stereotype will be a campus university such as Leeds, Birmingham or Warwick. These are like self-contained towns, with accommodation, academic and leisure facilities on a single site. There are pros and cons to spending most of your time in a place that is so student-oriented.

If you think you might find it claustrophobic, consider a university in a city such as Bristol, Edinburgh or one of the London institutions.

As collegiate universities, Oxford and Cambridge are special cases. Your college, rather than the university, will be the focus of your experience. You may relish being in a more intimate community like this, or find it too close-knit. Some other universities follow this model: Durham's colleges are most similar to those of Oxbridge, while Kent, Lancaster and York have a less rigid system.

Distance from home is often overlooked when choosing a university. If you want to go back regularly at weekends, attending a university at the other end of Britain will soon put demands on your time and money.

One alternative is to stay in the family home and attend a local university or college — the choice of almost 330,000 students last year, according to the Higher Education Statistics

Agency. It's a cost-effective way of studying, although the financial assistance available for home students is lower than for those living away.

You will also need to consider the duration. A three-year, full-time degree is standard in the UK, but it's not the only option. Four years is the norm at Scottish universities, as it is for modern-language degrees requiring a year abroad and for those degrees that include a year's industrial placement, such as IT, business or engineering.

There has been a rise in popularity for accelerated degree programmes that cram three years' study into two by reducing the long summer holiday. Pioneered by private universities, they are still the most popular in that sector. Just bear in mind that if you go to a private university, you will be subject to different fee structures and funding rules.

The advantages are obvious: only two years of fees and living costs, and a chance to join the workforce a year ahead of your peers. But these fast-track degrees allow less time for you to develop your ideas, interests and social life.

At the other end of the spectrum is part-time study, which lets you work while studying. Taking this path can stretch an undergraduate degree to six years or more, and again the funding regime is different. Yet another option for those wishing to work normal office hours is the full-time degree taught in the evenings or via a flexible learning system. However, these require a great deal of dedication and discipline.

Take your university research seriously and start early — don't rely on a few prospectuses and college websites. Alan Jones, a professional development executive at Ucas, advises attending higher education fairs. "Also, visit universities on open days and speak to staff and students — there's nothing like first-hand experience."

And don't be shy of contacting the universities directly to ask them questions. "They are happy to hear from you, and to know that they are receiving student applications that are well researched," adds Jones.

Why I chose...

To live at home

Simon Challis, 24, is in the third year of a BSc in Information Technology and Networking at **Middlesex University**.

“Before going to university, I worked for a couple of years and was in the process of saving up for a deposit on a house. Since I decided I wanted to keep as much of that money as I could, I thought it would be a cheaper option to commute to a local university from my home in St Albans.

“I don’t think it has disadvantaged me socially — at Middlesex there are quite a lot of students living at home. But you do have to make more of an effort to be part of university life. I took up snowboarding to get to know people, and also became a student ambassador for the university.”

An Oxbridge degree

Henrietta Kelly, 20, is a third-year student at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where she is studying for a BA in History of Art.

“It was the teaching system that attracted me most to Cambridge. The one-on-one or two-on-one supervision seemed to offer value for money over other universities — an important factor in light of tuition-fee rises. They really push you here, and at times the workload feels overwhelming, but the hours you get with professors and the top-class facilities make it worthwhile.

“The college system nurtures a strong sense of community and you get to know people in other years.

If you’re passionate about your subject, you should go for Oxbridge. You have to be very disciplined but you’ll meet like-minded people.”

Evening study

Niall Quilligan, 20, is in the third year of a BSc in Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London — a full-time course taught in the evenings.

“I did better than expected in my A-levels, so I reconsidered my options and chose Birkbeck. On this degree, you study four or five evenings each week. It allows you to work office hours throughout the three years, which I thought would give me the edge on graduating. I was apprehensive about the workload but it has definitely been the right choice.

“I was able to take on serious long-term work commitments and have already found a permanent graduate job in accountancy. The social side is different — there’s a more mature, dedicated crowd. But when we go out, we really go out.”

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