

How can I best support students applying for 2021 entry to make decisions on universities and courses?

It's that time of year when we would normally be rolling out the well-practised routine of HE Fairs, UCAS Exhibitions and Open Days for students applying for university entry in 2021. It goes without saying that for this application cycle things will be rather different.

The university application process can seem daunting at the best of times, particularly for students who are the first in their family to go to university, and having to whittle down the endless numbers of universities and courses is no easy task. This article will discuss ways in which schools and colleges can support their students to make decisions about which universities and courses to apply to under the current circumstances.

Universities have relied on similar outreach methods for a number of years, largely involving face-to-face contact and visits to campus. This period of lockdown has made it necessary for universities to rethink this approach and develop new, creative ways to reach students and provide them with the information they need to make those all-important decisions. As a result, we now have a series of virtual events - such as virtual open days and webinars for students to access from home.

Due to the current circumstances, these events are likely to be crucial in helping your students to make informed decisions on which courses and universities they will apply to. Therefore, ensuring that your students are aware of these online events is essential.

Promote Discussion

The nature of these online events means that students will need to take a more proactive approach in researching their university options. They may have to set aside their own time to do this, rather than having this time allocated to them in tutorials. Whilst this may seem inconvenient, this is excellent preparation for studying a degree, as university students are required to manage their time and workload for independent study.

To help your students get the most out of these events, it's important to encourage them to consider what they would like from a university experience beforehand, so they know what to look out for and what questions to ask.

I would recommend promoting discussion with your students on the following topics when considering university options:

- **Campus or city university?** Many students are unaware of the differences between campus and city universities and they provide quite different experiences.
- **Local or further away?** Considering option such as moving away or living at home will help to narrow down university choices. Your students can use [this quiz](#) from Advancing Access to help them to think about whether they would prefer to stay at home or move away.
- **The course** – The same subject will be taught differently at different institutions, so encourage students to think about what topics within their chosen subject interest them, and make sure to look out for these when researching courses. Students can check course modules on university websites.
- **Employability** – What are the prospects like for after graduation? University ranking guides such as [The Guardian League tables](#) are useful for this and allow students to search by subject.

It's OK if students don't know exactly what they want at this stage, but it's important for them to be aware of their options, and that different universities and courses will result in varying experiences. Encourage students to write a list of things which are important to them in a university experience, something that they can refer back to and use to prompt questions in online events.

Virtual open days

Virtual open days are great opportunities to find out more about a specific university, with the chance to go on virtual campus tours and speak to staff and current students. Remind your students to use these events as opportunities to find out about both their academic subject and student life as both factors will help to determine which university is right for them.

There will be opportunities to speak to academic staff but also teams such as admissions, accommodation, disability support, careers service etc. so it is a great time to ask questions.

Encouraging your students to consider what they want from a university experience and prepare questions beforehand is a great way to make sure students get the most out of these events.

Online presentations and talks

Whilst universities may not be able to visit you in school, it's worth getting in touch with their outreach teams to find out what support they can offer at this time. Many universities have developed online versions of the presentations and workshops they would normally be delivering in schools on key topics such as the application process, personal statements etc.

It's a great way to get information out to students and, as a bonus, we have often found that students are more likely to ask questions in this online format than they would in school, in front of their peers.

If you have safeguarding concerns, let universities know which virtual platforms are permitted by your school's policy and what you have been using to communicate with your own students and they will be as flexible as possible around this.

Unibuddy

Another platform to direct your students to is Unibuddy. Unibuddy allows prospective students to ask questions to current university students on a safe and secure platform. This is useful if students want to find out about a course in detail. Unibuddy also displays the university ambassadors' hometowns so prospective students can ask questions about what it was like to move to a new city/stay local.

As most of these resources are online, this can make it difficult for students without technology such as laptops or reliable WiFi to access the information they need. This is challenging, but with most university websites accessible on mobile phones, students can search for information using their mobile internet connection or request a hard copy of a prospectus. Many universities also offer PDF versions of their prospectuses, which can be downloaded once and then viewed offline. Most webinars are recorded, so students can watch them at a time convenient to them - either when they have access to mobile data or using public WiFi. This is far from ideal but hopefully these methods

will enable prospective students to access the information they need to make decisions when choosing a course and university.

The 2021/22 application cycle will undoubtedly be remembered for a number of reasons. Whilst it will have its challenges, we hope that the new resources and platforms that have been developed will benefit applicants for years to come.