

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

UNIVERSITY

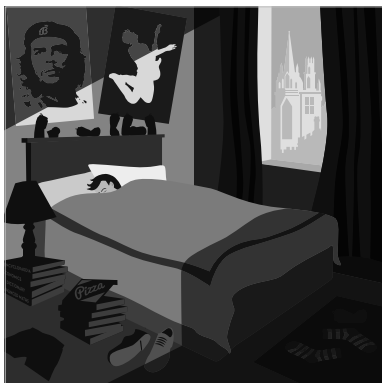
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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

UNIVERSITY



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It's all too easy to fritter away these years struggling to write essays, successfully spinning debt into credit or unsuccessfully spinning your washing.

THE GAME OF LIFE

University is a bluffer's paradise: interest-free overdrafts, optional workload, endless holidays, elastic deadlines, cheap travel and discount drinks. Even French civil servants don't have it this good.

As such, it is in among the gleaming spires, red brick and poured concrete of university towns that you will encounter the best and brightest of bluffers. It's tough competition. But if you can make it here, you'll make it anywhere (maximum points if you can slip that last sentence past a film studies student, especially one from York).

Although it's a struggle to get kicked out of university (you're only let out early on very bad behaviour), it is relatively easy to wander out of a lecture and never return. Even *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson (aka renowned swot Hermione Granger) is said to have abandoned her undergraduate degree at the USA's Brown University. Admittedly, this was not so much a case of giving up, as of not being allowed to grow up. It was rumoured that Watson left after her fellow students refused to stop heckling, 'Five points to Gryffindor!' whenever she answered a question.

At least this is proof that higher education produces more intelligent bullying, which is probably why Oxbridge produces so many prime ministers.

If you do make it to graduation there is no guarantee that you'll have done so in true student style. It's all too easy to fritter away these years struggling to write essays, successfully spinning debt into credit or unsuccessfully spinning your washing. And contrary to popular belief, this is not how you should be spending 'the best years of your life', as disenchanted former students tend to call them.

Instead, you should be feathering your nest with outrageous anecdotes, meeting people who you refuse to recognise as your social doppelgänger and neglecting to wash your sheets.

Luckily for you, this reassuringly short guide promises to let you in on the secret of MIMO ('minimum input, maximum output'; maximum points if you can slip that past a computing student as if it were a genuine computing term). It will conduct you safely through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about university life, and equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer; it might even allow you to be accepted as a worldly student of rare knowledge and experience. But it will do more; it will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your wisdom and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you probably didn't know the difference between a 'Geoff' (a first) and a 'Desmond' (a 2:2).

By the time you reach the glossary you will be more

than able to ace the game of student life. And trust us, university is a game. Play it right and you can collect money just for passing 'Go', score 75 points for a well-placed three-letter word, and win big on a pair of twos. What are you waiting for? It's almost lunchtime.



With a degree, you can end up with jobs you'd never have imagined yourself doing – working at a burger bar or a call centre, for instance.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

WHY GO TO UNIVERSITY ANYWAY?

How many undergraduates are currently studying at university in Britain? Depending on the time of day, the answer's probably no more than 2% of them. The rest are doing what students have done ever since Bologna started off the whole university thing in 1088 – conducting research into chemistry and human biology of the decidedly non-academic kind.

Every year in Britain, over half a million people start undergraduate life. Why should you join them? The standard reason is that graduates earn more; if you have a degree, it is estimated that you will earn over £160,000 more during your working life than a non-graduate who got similar A-level results. You earn on average £30,000 a year; they scrape by on a measly £18,000.

This will be enough to persuade most parents, or to put woolly-minded non-graduates in their place. But as a critical thinker of tertiary-education calibre, you know it's not as simple as this.

Because that average is inflated by the high-earning

medics and dentists, who put away a third of a million more than their unqualified peers. For humanities graduates, the figure is only £50,000; for arts grads, £35,000.

Today, a degree will cost you three or four years of £9,000 a year just for tuition. Add in living costs and, even with that part-time restaurant job, you'll rack up an eye-watering debt of between £30,000 to £60,000 – which, with interest, will involve repaying more like £65,000 to £85,000 over the ensuing years. Even a media studies first-year can see that those figures don't add up for everyone.

Of course, there are other benefits to having a degree, but even these must be taken with a pinch of salt. Graduates are fitter and healthier, for example, perhaps because they've slept a lot during the past three or four years and know about the dangers of a salty diet. (Though if being a graduate implies good health, being a student – with a lifestyle of late nights, junk food and excessive consumption – often doesn't.)

Research suggests that grads are also more active community participants – probably because they're going through their contacts book trying to get a job. They're also less likely to have criminal records, though that's possibly because they're smart enough not to get caught. They're more tolerant, too, on diversity and sexual matters, no doubt because they've done so much primary research on this themselves.

Bear in mind, though, that all the above figures come from research done by postgrad students. So treat anything you read on their website with caution. Those

PDFs may not be worth the paper they're written on.

But a university degree is about more than this. You make many new lifelong friends and contacts. And only a few new lifelong enemies. With a degree, you can end up with jobs you'd never have imagined yourself doing – working at a burger bar or a call centre, for instance.

You can learn not just about your subject, but about other people – and, most importantly, about yourself. People learn by making mistakes – and so in university you'll learn more than you ever thought possible.

Best of all, for three or four glorious years you can overindulge, party every night, work as much or as little as you want, and somehow stave off all responsibility until you muddle through your degree at the end. And all on borrowed money. Yet everybody will think you're being worthy and sensible, investing in your future.

This book tells you how to bluff your way through with minimum effort and maximum effect. You can convince people that your ignorance is originality, your guesses are wisdom, your laziness is efficiency, and your random path through life is a well-focused grand plan – all skills which, far more than your 2:1 in English or engineering or sports studies, will set you up for the real world.

MATURE STUDENTS

If you're happy to join the post-A-level or post-gap-year stampede to uni with your cohort, fine.

If not, then starting a degree later on is a very good option. A quarter of students in the UK are 'mature'. Not

a description of behaviour, but age; it means 'over 21 at time of starting'. Their numbers were rising steadily until increased tuition fees and funding cutbacks in access courses, which enable those without A-levels (or equivalent) to prepare for university. You can maintain that this is a government tactic to prevent those from poor backgrounds from studying politics and going on to challenge the status quo.

There are many advantages in being a mature student, principally that you don't have to act your age any more. Don't worry about 'not fitting in'; individuality is prized, so pass off your lack of tattoos or piercings, say, as a radical fashion statement.

Simply don't mention your age, or any event that happened before your fellow students' school prom. They won't be remotely interested in your past life – the world (or sex, which is the same thing) didn't start until they did A-levels. However, they'll be mildly impressed by your organisational and multitasking skills, perhaps honed from raising children or holding down an actual job: negotiating with authority figures, coping with hangovers, buying a round without having to visit a cashpoint first, being able to write longhand in joined-up writing. No hard-science university degree compares in complexity to filling in a tax return.

Tutors tend to treat mature students more as peers. There may well be an unspoken agreement between you: you're allowed to be late handing in if they're allowed to be late handing back. You're both grown-ups with other,

serious, life commitments, such as family or (in increasing order of rowdiness) stag/hen/departmental parties.

WHICH COURSE?

There are something like 50,000 courses available for education beyond school. Picking the right one isn't going to be easy, but if you can work through such a complicated process, it prepares you for other even more complex life-challenges, such as choosing a mobile phone contract or energy tariff.

What people usually mean by going to university is a degree: a three- or four-year course in a subject or combination of subjects. It can be even longer if you choose to do something like veterinary science, dentistry, medicine or lots of resits.

Abridged versions of these degrees exist, perhaps involving only the first year (certificate or diploma of higher education) or first two (foundation degree). 'Sandwich courses' involve a year of paid work as a middle section of the degree, named after the structure – not the packed lunch which is the only thing you can afford.

Those studying languages usually spend their third year of four working in a country where one of their languages is primarily spoken, often as a teaching assistant helping locals who have poor English, such as the English teachers.

So which subject should you study? As in the job world, enthusiasm usually trumps ability. If you love a subject, you'll enjoy your degree. This is why geographers are always getting lost, mathematicians can't add, economists

keep having to borrow money, sports studies people eat so many kebabs, and why those doing psychology have no idea about how people tick, so go on to lucrative careers in Human Resources.

SCIENCE V HUMANITIES V ARTS

Choose a subject to suit your personality. In sciences (physics, engineering, biology, etc.) you do tests to see if your ideas are right. In humanities (law, history, sociology, etc.) you see what other people have written to see if your ideas are right. In arts (art, theatre, dance, etc.) you just make everything up; being right isn't the point, it's being interesting.



No hard-science university
degree compares in complexity
to filling in a tax return.

Sciences tend to require more complexity-in-depth and cumulative study; arts a breadth and originality of viewpoint. You can't understand relativity without advanced maths, but you can write authoritatively about, say, twentieth-century art without ever having seen any Renaissance paintings (probably even without having seen any twentieth-century art either).

Whatever arts students will try to tell you, sciences are

harder. But whatever science students tell you, arts are more enjoyable and your fellow students more attractive.

Finally, think of the financial arguments.

‘Hard’ research sciences and professions such as law, dentistry and medicine have the best employment prospects and higher ultimate earnings. (But competition to get in is very keen, too: about 10 per place; five in the case of law.) So if money and status are more important than fun, go for these big-ticket courses.

Humanities – combinations of creativity and analysis such as languages, literature or music – offer enjoyable course content with some degree of financial return, though your most likely job at the end will be teaching humanities, which can feel rather circular.

Arts – creative disciplines such as, well, art – produce graduates who are barely more employable or better-paid than non-graduates. This is clearly the best option, offering very enjoyable courses with meagre financial return. So, because you’ll never earn enough to reach the threshold to start paying back your student loan, you can have your three or four years of fun for free.

WHICH UNIVERSITY?

There are more than 500 higher education institutions in the UK. Finding the right one for you is like a student disco. It seems packed with possibilities; but the ones you’d like most are out of your league or taken by more eligible rivals, while the ones that want you are too immature, too scruffy or too desperate.

According to Wikipedia (from which you'll be cutting and pasting half your essays), there are five groups of university, classified roughly by age (and decreasing order of prestige):

Ancient (pre-1800: Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, etc.)

Nineteenth century (London, Durham, etc.)

Red brick (early 1900s civic universities: Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, etc.)

Plate glass (1960s: East Anglia, Warwick, York, etc.)

New universities (post-1992 – former polytechnics or higher education colleges with long names like metro stations: York St John, Oxford Brookes, Manchester Metropolitan, etc.)

In a group of its own is the Open University, a popular and successful open-to-all, study-at-home option with 250,000 enrolled students. Established in 1968, it was familiar to TV audiences for its late-night lecture broadcasts until 2006.

OPEN DAYS

Matching yourself with a course and a university will involve a lot of tedious web surfing and possibly an open day. The latter is a valuable chance to see how reality compares with the university's web pages. Just because their website is well-organised, attractive and full of interesting content, it doesn't mean the place or the course will be.

The most desirable places to do a degree are still Oxford

or Cambridge, often referred to jointly as ‘Oxbridge’. These two ancient universities each consist of numerous effectively self-contained colleges, many in historic buildings, as evidenced by the plumbing. Both are springboards for high achievers, which may supply you with amusing future anecdotes – for instance, how you’re still waiting for the current chancellor of the exchequer to return the tenner you once lent him in the beer cellar.

Of the UK’s 55 prime ministers from Walpole (King’s, Cambridge) to Cameron (Brasenose, Oxford), Oxford has supplied 27, Cambridge 14, and other universities only three (including Gordon Brown, Edinburgh). 11 did not go to university at all, including Jim Callaghan and John Major. You can use this information to prove pretty much anything about universities – or, indeed, politics.

Technically, the competition for Oxford and Cambridge is just average: there are only five applicants per place (compared with nearly 14 applicants per place for the London School of Economics, or ‘LSE’), though that’s mainly because you need fistfuls of A-star A-levels, plus nonchalant extracurricular attainments, such as concert pianism and county-standard sport, to think about applying.

Oxford and Cambridge are world leaders in many academic disciplines, especially the most important one: chasing up well-heeled alumni for donations and bequests. Teaching students – with the lavishly uneconomic tutorial system of individual or pair sessions with tutors – is only the fourth most important Oxbridge priority. (The second is hosting conferences of American lawyers; the third is

keeping the senior common room wine cellar stocked.)

Not making Oxbridge doesn't mean 'second best', though. You can easily justify your choice of university – however reluctant it might have been – by focusing on other factors. For instance, Robert Gordon University (that's Aberdeen) outdid Cambridge in 2012 graduate employability (97.7% of graduates employed versus 94.9%). Here are a few more suggestions:

Desirability

Bristol's occasional image as a second best for unsuccessful Oxbridge candidates is belied by its application ratio: 11 per place, compared with five for Oxbridge. You're prouder to be there because it's harder to get in. Edinburgh and Warwick are also competitive. Don't use this reason if you end up at Swansea Metropolitan or Glyndŵr.

Subject specialism

Portsmouth is terrific for maths, Southampton is great for media studies, Liverpool for veterinary science – ha! Oxford doesn't even dare do media studies! A good one, this, as its plausible detail is hard to argue with. You can claim that your particular institution, whatever its reputation in other subjects, is a leader in yours.

Student happiness

What's the point in being successful and miserable? Buckingham and Bournemouth score even higher than Oxbridge for student satisfaction.

Cost of living

Inexpensive Dundee, Glyndŵr or Canterbury are likely to leave you with more to spend on essentials such as alcohol (the second biggest expense for students according to NatWest; the first being rent), and treats such as books (the 12th). Pricy Westminster, York, Winchester and Bournemouth are likely to leave you with less.

Size

Manchester, with 38,000 students, is 10 times bigger than Abertay Dundee. Oxbridge colleges feel small, too. Such everyone-knows-everyone intimacy can be a delight or a disaster, depending on whether you're trying to avoid someone you unwisely spent the night with.

Talking of which...

Male-female ratios

If you like being surrounded by women, put on your list Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh or Roehampton (three women per man). If you're after men, go for Imperial College London or Loughborough (nearly two men per woman). Bear in mind that quantity is not necessarily an indicator of quality (though one 'best-looking student' league table puts Loughborough at the top with Swansea, East Anglia and Leeds; the worst being Thames Valley, University for the Creative Arts and Bedfordshire).

Age profile

Mature students will feel at home at Glyndŵr or London South Bank, where well over half are over 21, but may stick out at Imperial, Loughborough or LSE (less than 5%).

There are plenty of 'league tables' available with even more niche factors, so you can always pick something obscure to justify your apparent choice. For instance, you chose Gloucestershire because it's the greenest, or a London institution for its rainbow cosmopolitanism, or a distant province for uniformity. Or you chose the University of the West of Scotland because its dropout rates are high – 23% compared with Cambridge's 1.3% – which means there'll never be a queue for the PCs.