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University

How to get an offer and prepare for interview

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This document offers advice on how to get an offer and prepare for a university interview for subjects within the biological sciences.

Getting an offer or invitation to interview

The UCAS basics:

1 Apply to universities that are likely to consider your application seriously.

2 Have a faultless application form with plenty of interesting content.

3 Have a supportive reference containing good predicted grades.

4 Write a personal statement that conveys that you are *interested* in the subject and *interesting*.

Where to apply?

The key consideration should be a programme and place you think you will enjoy. The best way to identify that combination is by visiting an Open Day and talking to current students and staff. The staff at your school or college will hopefully do their best to help you with this and should advise you on realistic choices. University departments publish their entry requirements, so find out what they are for the programmes you would like to enter. Then get a frank appraisal about your chances from the staff who teach you, before you burn your boats and fill in the UCAS entry form. However, be aware that published entry requirements may not tell a particularly useful story. Some universities set their ‘requirements’ high to persuade applicants that they are high profile. Others set theirs at a level at which they know students will cope (but routinely take in students with considerably better grades). Both *may* regularly accept students who fall slightly, or even well, below their published requirements. If in doubt, ask (via email or phone calls, or at Open Days). Admissions tutors/teams should be very happy to answer questions — if they aren’t, don’t go there!

Whatever you do, don’t apply to somewhere with published requirements way above anything you can realistically hope to achieve. And don’t try to persuade your teachers to inflate their predictions with a view to helping you get an offer. Admissions staff are likely to look at your past academic history (e.g. GCSE grades), so are unlikely to offer places to students who have not performed to levels consistent with their requirements. And if you do get a high offer that you cannot achieve, you are likely to be very disappointed in the summer if you don’t make the grades, because the university doesn’t have to accept you.

If your results are way out of line with your usual performance *for some very understandable reason* (e.g. serious ill health — yours or a close relative’s), then your school or college should hopefully have indicated this in your reference. But it would be worth you emailing the admissions staff at your target places (if their entry requirements are high) with a brief, accurate and matter-of-fact email to reinforce this if you really are sure you can pull the required results out of the bag with the final exams.

Lastly, if you are really keen to go to a particular university, don’t put four or five similar programmes at that establishment on your application. Choose one or at most two — they are likely to have similar entry requirements for all their programmes and if you don’t make them, you will have lost the chance to be considered by other institutions. It may also be that somewhere you weren’t strongly considering turns out to be absolutely perfect for you when you pay them a visit on a Discovery/Taster Day. (These are occasions not to be missed — invitations will come after you have been made an offer, so you know they want you — do you want them? The day will give you a great insight and may well cause a change of your first choice.)

What do admissions staff look for on the   
application form?

In priority order:

Your qualifications (those achieved to date and predicted grades for any forthcoming examinations)

Make very sure the former is complete, accurate and that all the details are correct. Make sure you list all of the examinations you have still to take (remembering to include the Extended Project Qualification [EPQ] if you are doing one).

Your personal statement

This really can make the difference between an offer (or an invitation to an interview) and the dreaded rejection. Here are two openers from applications for zoology:

‘*I have been interested in humans and animals all my life*…’

and

‘*I hated spiders as a child*…’

What are the problems with the first one? Well for starters, we humans are animals, and secondly, it is a very dull way to begin. Which do you think made me want to read on when I was an admissions officer? You are writing for a fellow human, one who may read several hundreds of forms every year. If you can catch the eye of the over-worked form readers and then hold their interest, the battle is almost won. The personal statement should help the people-who-will-get-jobs stand out. (Why should a university worry about whether you will get a graduate-level job? Because employment metrics figure in both league tables and reputations, both of which are important to universities). The best applicants have plenty strings to their bows. They may have done summer work in a research lab, or an in-depth project as part of their studies. They may have a black belt in origami, or were jugglers on their regional team. They may have worked every Saturday and Sunday at the local garden centre. What matters is that this activity makes them stand out, and that in their spare time they probably had to prioritise and resolve conflict — to read the biology textbook, or to work/practise the origami/juggling etc. They had to spend enough time on each to fulfil their obligations to the workplace or reach a good standard at their sport alongside studying hard. There isn’t a university programme in the country that doesn’t require effective prioritising, and not a single job for graduates that doesn’t demand at least two balls in the air at once! A UK Government study published recently showed that having a plan for your future career (even if it changes while you are at uni) can be beneficial, so do make some remarks on the career you currently envisage. *‘Those who had clearer plans were more likely to have reported positive outcomes two and a half years after graduation, with those whose main activity was working in a professional or managerial role or further study more likely to have had clearer career plans at an early stage than those who were in non-professional employment or were unemployed.*’ **1**

The personal statement is the way to convey *your* interest in the subject/s for which you have applied. I’ve often read forms that tell me that my subject is interesting/important/fast-moving etc. — but I already know that! What I want to know is what *you*, the applicant, finds fascinating and why. It is also the way to show what an interesting person you are (giving you a great chance to spend some of an interview talking about things you know a lot about, rather than being asked questions about things the interviewer knows a lot about and you don’t). What you should try to show is an interest in something biological that will allow you to talk authoritatively with the interviewer. If you have bred chinchillas for years and have worked out the inheritance of their coat colour, by all means wax eloquent about it in your statement (but expect some interview questions about genetics and breeding behaviour). If you would love to ‘work with dolphins’ but your only experience of these superb mammals is from a SeaWorld show, I would advise you not to write about that (see later). Bottom line — don’t include *anything* you can’t discuss in reasonable depth, with enthusiasm, at interview. I’d also recommend you avoid talking enthusiastically about your interest in any aspects of your general studies A-level if one or more of your top choices does not include general studies in their offer.

Finally, get feedback from teachers, family and friends on what you have written — make sure they think it sounds like you, and go through it with a fine-toothed comb (or someone with impeccable English) for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

The reference

What should you be doing to elicit a glowing, supportive reference? Well, if you turn up on time to lessons and are engaged and involved in class that will help, but there may be a lot more that you can do. Do you contribute to the wider community in your area, or at school/college? Are you on the peer-support scheme? Have you made it clear to your biology teacher/s that you do (preferably relevant) voluntary work, or are really keen in some way, such as helping with college Open Days, workshops, national or international initiatives? Get to know your teachers and make sure they really understand how keen you are on the subject you wish to read at uni. Watch *Horizon*, documentaries etc. and recommend any that might appeal to fellow students (e.g. on BBC iPlayer). Don’t be a pest, but make sure the person writing your reference for each subject has a good idea of how keen and engaged you are.

If your school or college asks you to submit a CV or list of achievements, this is your chance to make sure your teachers say something about any activities that you were unable to mention in your statement due to space constraints. Make the most of everything you have achieved but don’t make things up. If you are offered the opportunity to check your reference before your form is sent off, grab it. Read what has been written, make sure it is accurate and shows you in the best light possible. If you have organised relevant work experience that happened to be through your uncle’s firm but then carried it out well, somewhere that he was not involved, make sure the reference doesn’t say ‘he did some work experience with his uncle’.

Your employment record

For non-vocational programmes\* it is not usually important to have had a particular type of experience or job, but an important bonus is that you have held a job down. Even if it was part-time shop or café work, the fact that you were reliable enough to be kept on for several months will count in your favour, and will attest to your interpersonal, organisational and communication skills. Working part-time while studying is another boost to graduate employability**1** so it will boost your chances of acceptance if you already have experience.

Special needs

If you have any, be sensible and put them down. Inclusive teaching practices at most good universities should cover dyslexia but to make sure you get the best support you would be wise to be honest about any special needs you have. Many of the brightest and best biological scientists have special needs — for example, see how many scientists (including three Nobel prizewinners) have the ‘gift of dyslexia’ www.dyslexia.com/famous.htm — so make sure your future teachers know how best to accommodate your needs.

Surviving an interview/discovery day

You have been invited for an interview, or to an event where decisions (or at least impressions of you) may be made. Bravo! That is a huge step forward. All that is needed now is to ensure that the reality matches up to the exciting-sounding individual on the form.

What to wear?

What you wear really doesn’t matter, so long as you feel comfortable and credible (and it does not include a T-shirt with a contentious slogan). You are being interviewed about your interest in biological sciences, not clothes.

What to say?

What you say should also be easy — be yourself. Don’t try to guess what the interviewer wants you to say, just give honest responses. It is quite possible that you will not be asked much, or indeed anything, about topics on the exam specifications (what you know about that will be tested in the exams). What you are asked will probably be determined by your personal statement, and should relate to what really interests you. Be prepared to talk in an informed manner about the subject you have applied for, and anything you have mentioned. The chinchilla-breeder should be made up, but the applicant who told me he liked to rebuild classic cars was exposed as a sham when it became pretty obvious he didn’t know the difference between camshafts and camiknickers!

If you have enjoyed a show at SeaWorld, make sure you understand some of the controversies that surround animals, especially marine mammals, in captivity. You can expect to be asked about your reaction to the *Blackfish* (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2vG\_Ifu4zg), a movie powerful enough to make Pixar delay release while they changed the ending of their film *Finding Dory* (see www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/12/pixar-alters-finding-dory-plot).

Publications such as Biological Sciences Review, *New Scientist*, *Scientific American* and *National Geographic* can give added value to television coverage (and will prepare you with ammunition for the interview question ‘Have you read anything that particularly interested you recently?’). Another good source of information is *ScienceDaily* news, especially as the sources of the information the journalists use are always cited, so you can take your research further (www.sciencedaily.com). Have a look on this website the evening before your interview — it could be excellent preparation for questions about the current hot topics in biology.

If you have had any employment or work experience, be prepared for questions that ask you to reflect on what you gained. What did you enjoy, what did you find challenging but overcame etc.? Employers value transferable skills such as team-working, problem-solving, communication, time-management, negotiation, resilience, and these are also vital skills for success at university — your cautious confidence with most, and your desire to enhance the rest, may be explored.

The obvious opening questions are ‘Why did you choose this city/course?’ and should be easy to answer. If the football, orchestra or access to local mountains was a factor, by all means say so, but, as above, expect to be asked to elaborate on why these things are important to you, and if at all possible work in some link with the programme for which you have applied. If the ‘superb reputation for research’ was a factor, you should know what the term ‘REF’ means, and should expect to be asked whether you know about any of the research projects that are currently enhancing that reputation (check the university website before leaving home!). The most obvious closing questions are those that mirror interviews for employment — what will *you* bring to the organisation? Be prepared to outline what contribution you might make to university life. (Again, students who give back — in the form of becoming officers for societies, programme representatives, sporting representatives etc. — fare better in the graduate job market than students who limit themselves to academic endeavours**1**).

Finally, it cannot be emphasised too often, don’t worry. If there is something you don’t know, just admit it (if possible working the conversation round to something you do know about). ‘No, I have no idea why all F1 hybrid female chinchillas are brown with white spots, but I have discovered that they all prefer food pellets with more calcium than their parents…’ If you say something daft, just own up and say, ‘Sorry, can I have another go at that?’

What to ask?

What to ask can be important. Try not to ask questions that are listed in the FAQs in the ‘Interview Day’ brochure. Instead focus your questions on academic or employment-related matters that may be specific to *you*, and that show you have researched the course on offer. If there is a work placement scheme, for example, find out whether there are placements available for what you might like to do. If that is work in a museum or zoo, for example, is the work salaried? What conditions or standard of first-year examination results are required for entry to that opportunity? Do you have to find the placement, or does the university find it for you? Do graduates get offered jobs at their placement institutions? Is there an opportunity to study abroad? (Again, students who are ‘mobile’ during their programme are more likely to secure graduate employment and get better degree outcomes than their non-mobile peers**2**). If there are field courses, are they compulsory, when and where do they happen, how much do they cost, and is the work project-based or didactic teaching? If you have always wanted to take up juggling but have always been too busy working in the garden centre, don’t be afraid to ask if there is a juggling club. Your interviewer will hope that you will want not simply to maintain your strengths but to expand your horizons at university.

Don’t feel you must ask questions — it is always nice to hear that the literature and introductory talk have ‘answered them all’. But you may find it reassuring to have a few written down in advance in case you or your interviewer dries up and you get to that stage with time to spare.

This may be an opportunity to mention problems that might prevent you achieving your predicted grades. If your chemistry teacher was recently run over by a truck and the supply teacher is dreadful, or your father is ill and you have to help run his business, or you have been ill and missed some studying time, then do mention this. There may be nothing that the interviewer can do to alter the offer you are made, but it might make a big difference once the results are out. If you have just missed the required grades but your great interview performance and problem have been recorded, it might tip the balance at confirmation. I have referred to the interview notes made by staff on ‘near-miss’ candidates and found it in my heart to admit them before now — so don’t hold back.

Good luck!

**1** ‘Planning for success: graduates’ career planning and its effect on graduate outcomes’, Department for Education, March 2017: www.gov.uk/government/publications/graduates-career-planning-and-its-effect-on-their-outcomes

**2** ‘Gone International: mobility works’, Universities UK, March 2017: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/gone-international-mobility-works.aspx

\*This article does not relate to vocational programmes such as medicine, dentistry, optometry and veterinary science, where relevant work experience and a clear idea of what the vocation involves is essential. We have covered these programmes in Biological Sciences Review. Our advice is somewhat different for each, but to start you off, if it is medicine or veterinary science that interests you, we published an article by one of our editors with experience of admissions to medicine in our February 2012 issue (see ‘So you want to study medicine…?’, Vol. 24, No. 3, pages 10–12), aspiring vets should read the *Prospects* column in Vol. 26, No. 1, pages 12–14, optometry was covered in Vol. 26, No. 3, pages 15–19, pharmacy was covered in the Vol. 27, No. 1 and nursing/midwifery in Vol. 27, No. 2.

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