

# Questions to ask at university open days



Get behind the glossy brochures by asking our probing questions at open days. Is this university the right place for you?

There are two types of open days, 'pre-offer' and 'offer-holder' days. The first take place in the summer or early autumn. These are for students who are thinking of applying to a university and want to get a sense of what the place is like. Often there are talks about the wider university experience (accommodation, finance, careers etc.) as well as taster sessions from every subject department. Attendees can attend talks relating to several disciplines if they have yet to make up their mind.

At these open days you should familiarise yourself with the financial support available (loans, grants, bursaries etc.), look at the different types of accommodation that are on offer, ask about living arrangements in subsequent years (on-campus housing is often only for first-years), and find out about campus activities that interest you

(sport, clubs, music/drama etc.). Does the university have the facilities that you are looking for? Above all else, think about what it might be like to live there for 3 or 4 years.

The open days for offer-holders take place in the spring and are department-specific. Sometimes that particular event will be the only one taking place on campus that day, and it is directly tailored to people who need to identify the difference between the particular places they hold offers from.

At both types of open day you can ask questions. Asking really probing questions will provide the most valuable information and so help you make the right choice. Every university will produce a glossy brochure telling you what a great place it is for study. Your job is to find out if it's the right place for you.

## How is the degree taught?

This is the most important question since it tells you how much contact you will have with the staff. Normally for a history degree this will involve a combination of lectures, seminars and tutorials, but

understanding the ratio between these things is important. You will get a lot more one-to-one teaching in seminars and tutorials than in lectures.

Key follow-up questions:

- What are the normal contact hours per week? (All universities have to collate these statistics, so they should be available.)
- How much of the teaching is done by full-time academics and how much by part-time staff including postgraduates and post-doctoral fellows?
- How many essays per term will I have to write?
- What are the arrangements for feedback on written work?
- How is the degree examined/assessed?
- Is there a dissertation module in the final year?
- What is the staff-student ratio?

## How much optionality is there in the degree?

All history departments will have an impressive list of modules, but to what extent can you build your own degree on the basis of your own interests?

Key follow-up questions:

- What modules are mandatory, and how many modules each year can be chosen?
- Can I take modules in other departments?

## What are the particular strengths of the department?

This is an interesting question to pose. Some will highlight research strengths in particular areas, others will point to high levels of student satisfaction from the National Student Survey (NSS). If you are looking for a department that has strengths in areas that particularly interest you (for example Modern European History, Medieval History, British Empire or the Americas) then this question can be crucial to your final decision.

Key follow-up questions:

- What did the department score in the last NSS?
- What did the department score in the last REF? (The Research Excellence Framework is a measure of research excellence conducted every few years. New and updated results should have been published towards the end of 2014.)



It is important to ask about the types of teaching methods used



It is worth asking about arrangements for pastoral support

## What are the options for study abroad?

An increasingly important part of the offerings of any department are for a year abroad. Many history departments in the UK are part of the Erasmus scheme, permitting students to spend a year at a partner university in Europe. Some of these classes will be taught in English, others will be in a foreign language. In addition, some universities have exchange arrangements further afield, in Asia, the Americas and Australia.

Key follow-up questions:

- How much competition is there for places to study abroad?
- Will my year abroad count for my degree or not?
- What level of language competency is required (for non-English-speaking countries)?
- How is foreign study financed?

## What are the arrangements for pastoral support?

Not everything goes without a hitch at university and all departments should have procedures in place in case a student has problems (medical, emotional, financial and so on).

Key follow-up questions:

- How quickly will I get an appointment to see someone in the department about a problem?
- What are the penalties for not submitting work on time?
- Can my parents get involved?
- Are there extra/hidden costs?
- Are there field trips, for instance, that you would have to pay for?

## What can I do with this degree?

This is a popular question, and the people leading the open day should be able to point to careers their former students have gone on to. There might be a careers service rep there, too, to answer questions.

Getting answers to these questions will help you make an informed choice about where to study for your degree.

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