

Manchester Live: The art of the application (transcript)

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Hi everyone, we're about to start the art of application webinar. My name is Laura. I work in the student recruitment and widening participation team at the University of Manchester. I go out and about in schools and colleges, usually delivering presentations and engaging with learners, teachers, parents and carers. So today we're going to look at how to put a UCAS application together. We're going to look at writing a personal statement and some other things that are important to consider.

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Please do use the question section. If you do have any questions that you'd like to ask we have staff manning the software so that they can respond.

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Okay, so we're going to look at what UCAS is; how the application form is structured and the application process; the personal statement and some top tips for writing an effective personal statement; and then a note on references and other things to consider.

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So UCAS is the organization that manages higher education applications in the UK. It's also how you apply to university. So they provide a track and apply online service. So as well as overseeing applications, it's how you actually submit an application. In addition, it's an unbiased guide for students, parents and advisors. So it's somewhere that you can go for information.

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It's not affiliated to a particular University and you can get an overview of all the courses available at all the higher education institutions.

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So we'll take a look at the application form and give you some highlights of the form and some of the key features. So it's an online form and you have up to five choices. And that's four choices for medicine,

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dentistry and veterinary science. And you can only apply to Oxford or Cambridge if those institutions are ones that you're interested in. There is a cost associated with the UCAS application. It's 20 pounds for one choice or 25 pounds for multiple courses and there are several sections to be filled in by you and your school or college, and we'll go through some of these sections and how you can prepare to them as well a little bit later on.

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Okay, so some of the key dates coming up for 2021 entry. So as you can see here, what are listed on screen a dates for 2020 entry in the main. However, we do have some early indication at this stage of what will happen in the 2021 cycle. So I'll talk through this slide and hopefully it'll become clearer as we go along. So usually around the beginning of May - the summer before you will start University in the following September -

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the UCAS Search tool will go live. And for 2021 entry, it has been confirmed that the 19th of May is going to be when UCAS apply will launch. And the 8th of September will be when applications can actually be sent to UCAS.

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So some of the dates for the 2021 application cycle haven't been released yet. In previous years, however, the deadlines have been the 15th of October for medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and Oxford or Cambridge applications; and then the 15th of January for on-time applications.

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So what this means is that any other course, apart from those ones listed there for October the 15th, are due to be submitted by the 15th of January. We haven't had these dates confirmed, but I wanted to give you an idea of what it's been like in previous years. And then at some point in May, decisions are due on applications that have been submitted by the 15th of January.

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The main thing to remember though is that these dates are really important. As they get released, obviously they'll be updated on the UCAS website. But you do need to keep to internal deadlines that your school and college provides. So they need to collate your application, get references together. They'll have a large number of students to do this for, so it's really important that you pay attention to the internal deadlines from your school and college.

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So a note on the UCAS equal consideration deadlines.

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It's not first come first served. All applications are considered equally regardless of submission date, but the advice that we do give to students is it's good to get your application out of the way to focus on working hard for the next academic year.

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So we always offer more places on our courses than the number available because some of our offer holders will choose other universities. So something to bear in mind when you're perhaps looking at the numbers of students that universities - that their intake is, do remember that we always offer more places because we appreciate that people put other universities on their choice list.

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Okay. So how does the UCAS submission process work? You submit one application to UCAS and then UCAS will disseminate that application to your choices. So as we said earlier, you've got up to five choices, and then four in some cases, but there's always one application that's going to all your choices.

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So the main part of the presentation now is going to be looking at the personal statement, and how you can put a statement together that's representative of you, that ensures that you're selling yourself effectively and you're promoting yourself to higher education institutions, and you're talking about the skills, knowledge and experience that you have that would mean you would be a suitable candidate for the course

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You want to apply for.

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I've got a few quiz questions first of all as we're looking at some of the key facts about a personal statement. So there's some true and false statements up on the screen and it'd be

good for you to have a think about whether or not these are true or false. So there is no maximum length to a personal statement?

7:23

This is false. The personal statement is a maximum of 47 lines or 4000 characters, whichever comes first. So I do recommend that you copy and paste some text, put it on an A4 piece of paper, get a bit of an idea of how that looks and how many words you've got to play with. So it's usually around about just over a side of A4 but it's always worth you doing that just to get a sense of what the word count is.

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A personal statement can be written in paragraphs.

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So this is true, you can use paragraphs in a personal statement. And we do advise that you do this. Think about who's reading a personal statement, the admissions team within the universities, on within the academic schools, will assess applications. And we'll talk a little bit about what they're looking for in a potential student later on. However, the part of the application in your own words, with your own voice, is the personal statement.

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So you want to show that you've thought about this personal statement. That you've structured it, you've themed the paragraphs. So it's a really good idea to use paragraphs in your personal statement. But remember that blank lines count towards the maximum.

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The UCAS Apply software has spelling and grammar checks.

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So this is false. Apply will not spell check your work. We recommend that you prepare your personal statement offline and then copy and paste it into the apply software.

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So that is something to really consider and really think about. It's very easy when you're putting together a piece of work, particularly when your heads been in it, and you've been focusing on it for a long time, to miss certain words that are spelled incorrectly and your eyes read what they want it to read. So it's important that you go back over your work. You spell check, you double spell check, you give it to somebody else to have a look at as well, and don't just rely on any spell checking software. You can write the different personal statement for each of your choices.

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So as you all know from the other slide that we looked at earlier, you can only write one personal statement and this personal statement will be used for all your choices. So if you are considering, for example, a course such as history at one university, and then history and politics at another university, have a think about the skills that link those two subjects together, and how you can demonstrate that you've got those skills and how those courses fit

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neatly together. So what do you study at the moment that demonstrates your aptitude for history and for politics?

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You can use bold, italics and underlined characters in your personal statement.

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So this is false. You cannot use italics bold or underlining. The system will remove this formatting and this is to ensure that it's fair for everybody. So, please don't spend too much time or any time jazzing up your text or highlighting certain sections, as all that will be removed. You should keep a copy of your personal statement.

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And this is true. So the personal statement could be used as the basis for an interview. So it may well be that they ask you a question about a text that you've referred to in your personal statement or some work experience that you talked about. So keep a copy just so that you're prepared to answer any questions on it and it's good to have it to hand.

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Okay. So let's take a look at some of the admissions criteria and what we consider when looking at potential students.

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And we want to see that students have got an understanding of the course that they're applying to. So this is where research is really crucial and you can spend some time over the next few months, the next few weeks looking into what courses are available, what you think you might like to do, what skills, knowledge and experience you have, but ultimately as well what the demands of the course are and what will be expected of you. So that's where your research really comes in.

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Also admissions tutors want to see that you have the potential to study at a university like Manchester.

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So what can you do? What can you demonstrate, or how can you demonstrate that you've got the potential to access higher education study and meet those demands? So it's a very different way of learning, going to University, then sixth form or college. So how can you demonstrate you've got the potential to study at that higher level?

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We want to see that you're an independent student and that you can work independently and yes, yes get involved in teamwork when the opportunity is there, but also take control of your own learning and work independently, which is really crucial thing in higher education. And then finally, how will you contribute more broadly to the university? So not just through your academic life, but socially and perhaps any campaigns or clubs and societies that you get involved in.

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How will you contribute more broadly to that student life and student experience?

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How do we assess this? What evidence do we look? We take into consideration you predicted grades.

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And we also look at academic performance. We will take a look at and what you've done at GCSE level as well in some cases, and look at any information from teachers that gives us an idea of your academic performance.

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The personal statement as you can see is the only part of the application where it's your voice in your words and you can tell us why you want to study the course that you want to study,

and what skills, knowledge and experience you have that supports that application. And the personal statement is a crucial part of what's considered when we're looking at applications.

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We then will take into consideration a reference from your tutor and that reference will often encompass all the subjects that you're doing. So your subject tutors will often be asked to feed into that as well.

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And there are two sections here in yellow that are only for some students and are very much dependent on the course that you apply for. So some courses like medicine and dentistry have admissions tests that they asked students to complete. Some courses also interview as well, and that could be a typical face-to-face interview or a panel, or it could be combined with a visit day so that you get a feel for a particular institution, get to meet student ambassadors, and also

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understand what the university is looking for in a potential student.

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So what should a personal statement include how can you start constructing it and thinking about it when you have a blank page in front of you?

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So the main part should focus on your academic and personal abilities. So how can you demonstrate that you meet the requirements of the course and are interested in this course also? Secondly, the reasons for choosing the course, that can be so varied dependent on a student's circumstances, or why they want to do the course perhaps in terms of a career.

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And so why is it that it's this course that you want to study? You can also then look at any further qualifications and talk about what else you do outside of your course. This is relevant in terms of the skills that you need to study at university. But also kind of demonstrates further interests as well. We do want to know about outside interests. We do want to get a kind of whole picture of who you are as an applicant, but do bear in mind that these should be shorter sections than the academic section.

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Then for some courses work experience will be a really key part, and any volunteering that you do, and for others less so.

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So it's important if you do have any work experience, or if you've done some in the past, that you talk about this in a way that demonstrates that there's relevant skills, and not just being descriptive about the work experience, but what you actually learned. And then also a personal statement is a chance to talk about your aspirations. Why do you want to study this course? Will it lead you down a certain path, or to a certain career? And remember at this stage you're applying for the course. You're not applying for a particular career, but it's certainly a great opportunity to talk about your aspirations.

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How do we use the personal statement? So it can be used during interviews as we mentioned earlier. It can also be used to differentiate between applicants.

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So if we've got two applicants, two applications in front of us with very similar academic background in terms of the subjects and their grades that they're offering, then the personal statement can be used. When selecting the students that will be invited to interview for example, it could be used to find out more detail about an applicant's academic background. It can be used to advise students if there is perhaps a course that's a little bit more suitable for that student in the way that they've talked about their interests. And some schools also ask for an additional statement. So for example medicine at Manchester do ask for an additional statement to talk a little bit more about additional

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criteria that will be relevant for the course.

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Okay, so we're now going to be talking about skills and experience. We've already talked about the importance of not just being descriptive. So saying what you do isn't enough - you need to show evidence, and we recommend this method when you're thinking about how to construct your personal statement. It's a really good activity to do first of all to get you into this frame of mind of talking about your experiences in a really relevant way when you're applying to university.

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So A stands for activity. What have you done? What is the actual task or the skill or the experience that you're going to be talking about?

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B is the benefit. What have you learned from it? What skills have you acquired? So again, not just telling us about A, the activity, but expanding on that further with B, the benefit. So the skills, the experience, the increased knowledge that you have - what is it that you got from that?

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And then finally, C: how does it relate to your course that you want to study, and how will it help you more broadly succeed at university?

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So we're not recommending that you use this sort of literally in your personal statement. I'll give you an example of

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an ABC method here, but we recommend that you almost do this as an activity leading up to writing a personal statement, to get you in that frame of mind and to start thinking and questioning. Why am I including this in the personal statement? Why is it relevant to what I want to do? So here's an example and this is part time work where the student serves customers and orders stock. 'This means I'm able to manage my time well, have good communication skills,

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and can take on levels of responsibility. Therefore during the English and drama degree, I will be able to manage my workload successfully.'

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So there are different ways of doing this. You can talk about a club or society that you belong to, you can talk about a particular piece of work that you've done. But if you can try and follow the ABC method when you're thinking about it, then it will always be relevant to

include something in your personal statement. You'll make it relevant. You'll be talking more about what you've learned from it rather than just being descriptive.

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So you've got lots of skills and you will be improving them and enhancing them all the time throughout your daily life. So have a think about what it is that the course that you're interested in is looking for in a potential applicant, and then think about how you can demonstrate those skills. Not just through your academic work but also through the extracurricular stuff that you do, and any past experiences that you have and which ones are crucial for you

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when applying to University. So here's a suggested personal statement structure. We wanted to give you this as a guide. It's certainly not set in stone and this can be played around with but it's again just to help with that feeling when you're faced with a blank page, where do you start with something like this?

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So the introduction and the conclusion, as you can see, because the boxes indicate how much time - like weighting - you should give to each section, are roughly the same size, so they should be quite short and snappy to ensure that the main part of the personal statement is being focused on. So what academic skills and knowledge do you have that prepare you to succeed in a particular subject? And then what additional reading have you done, or anything else that kind of supports your interest in this subject? Have you got any work experience, volunteer work or a part time job that's relevant? Any extracurricular activities or other qualifications? And again, they shouldn't be the main part of the personal statement. It's great to include them.

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But do you leave the majority of the personal statement over to the academic skills and knowledge that you have.

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So a good personal statement has a strong introduction and conclusion, it's original, interesting and enthusiastic. Try and vary the sentence structure. Try to avoid starting every sentence with the word 'I'. So have a think about how you can mix it up

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So that it reads well and it's interesting to read for the admissions tutor. Be really selective as well. It's always easier to write more and then cut it down later. Try and avoid waffling and words and unnecessary statements. If you're going to use quotations, do you use them if you find a suitable one, if you think it enhances your personal statement. But we do sort of advise warning with this, just because quotations can come across a bit cheesy. They can be a bit irrelevant if they're just thrown in a personal statement. So just be quite cautious with them and ask yourself very carefully why you want to include it, because ultimately we want to hear your voice in the personal statement.

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Hide the thesaurus, in the sense that you should write in the way that you would usually write. So we don't just want to sort of see long vocabulary. We want to hear your voice. And yes do ensure that sentences are varied, but just be mindful of the words that you say, that you're using and that you understand them.

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Make everything relevant as we've talked about before. So whether it's extracurricular or your academic courses and skills. Remember that you're applying for the course at this stage and not the career. The clue is in the name. We want to understand who you are and why you are suitable for the course. It's a personal statement personal to you.

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Okay. I wanted to show you the most overused opening sentences. It's from a number of years ago now but I think it really illustrates this point about how an introduction should be original and enthusiastic. And there's nothing wrong at all with any of these sentences on the screen. So these are all perfectly good ways of opening a personal statement, but just have a think and certainly have a look on the right hand side.

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You can see there the number of times that these opening sentences appeared in one application cycle. So there's some huge numbers there, and I think it's important to perhaps even come back to the introduction. You can write the main body of your personal statement first and then come back to the introduction as it is quite hard to start it. But perhaps think about a way that's really engaging and that's unique to you.

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I wanted to also include some 'what not to do's. I'm going to leave these up on the screen for you to read over the next few minutes.

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Okay, so I really like some of these, they did make me laugh. The one on the bottom right hand side. I think it really illustrates that point of attention to detail and perhaps reading what you want it to say rather than what it actually says. So 'at school I held the position of head bog'. And we can only assume that they meant to say head boy there. And as an English literature graduate myself I certainly find the one on the left hand side quite amusing as well.

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Just some more here for you to read. I do challenge you to read the one on the right hand side in one big breath.

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And as you can see the quotation there at the top: 'I'm hoping to pass my driving test so I can drive to [insert uni name here] every day'. You shouldn't be referring to universities by name when you put together a personal statement. So remember your application is going to be going to up to five other universities. So do ensure that you're not mentioning your desire to attend a particular university by name. If you've attended Summer Schools or Outreach days

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and have had interactions in that way with universities, that's great and definitely include it. But certainly be really mindful of ensuring you're not expressing a desire to go to a particular institution.

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Okay, a quick notes on plagiarism. In one year 234 UCAS personal statements contained the following sentence: 'ever since I accidentally burnt holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my eighth birthday, I've always had a passion for science'.

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So it's a really unique, funny, interesting opening sentence to a personal statement. But for it to have been included in that many personal statements, it's clearly been plagiarized. So personal statements are checked against numerous statements past and present, and those on

websites and in books. And that's through a UCAS similarity detection service called Copy Catch. And in one academic year,

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8458 were flagged as having been plagiarized. And then 1% of all applications are identified as fraudulent. This isn't anything to worry about too much. The main message here is just to ensure that it's your own work. It's a personal statement, it is pertinent to you, and that you don't use - however funny or relevant a particular sentence is, or like a part of text that you want to copy into your statement – please don't

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do that. It's very much your work and there are consequences for plagiarism.

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So moving on to references and other things to consider. Communication between you and your referee is crucial. Make sure they're aware of what you do outside the classroom. So for example, extracurricular involvement in school and college activities, any work experience.

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Do just ensure that your tutors, and whoever is writing your reference, are aware of your intentions, what you want to study, and other things that might really support that application. It's often your form tutor, your personal tutor who will be your referee. But as I said earlier they do get subject tutors to feed in to that as well, so that universities have a complete picture. A final note that teachers do like to be positive, and a reference is very much there to support your application, but they do have a duty to you and your university choices to be realistic.

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So just ensure that that communication is kept open and that you're talking with your referee.

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So it's over to you! Research your application and set yourself clear and realistic goals. Meet deadlines and keep the form accurate, and when it comes to results day as well do keep in touch with teachers as they're there to support you.

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I wanted to just finish with ways of getting involved with the University of Manchester. Now, we're in this situation,

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so obviously we're not visiting schools and colleges at the moment and that activity has stopped. But we do have a series of Manchester Live webinars taking place focusing on the student experience, focusing on Manchester itself, and the University of Manchester accommodation, student finance, choosing a course in the university, and also making an application through UCAS. All these will be added to these webinars over the next few weeks. There is going to be at least one a week running live and then you can also listen back to a webinar whenever suits you as well. And there will be more content added as we progress, so do keep checking back on the website that's on the screen there. Thank you very much for joining the webinar today and for listening. All the very best and do get in touch with us

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via the Manchester Live pages. There is an email address there if you have any questions
Thank you.