Getting Into Imperial

and Other Top UK Universities

Khuselee

Table of Contents

A Quick Word Before You Start

Part 1: Getting In

Chapter 1: My Personal Journey
Chapter 2: The Olympiad & Supercurricular Playbook
Chapter 3: Choosing a Degree
Chapter 4: A Personal Take on the Top UK Universities
Chapter 5: GCSEs
Chapter 6: A-Levels
Chapter 7: The UCAS Journey
Chapter 8: The Personal Statement
Chapter 9: Interviews
Chapter 10: Getting the Offer
Chapter 11: Should You Take a Gap Year?
Chapter 12: 3-Year vs 4-Year Courses
Chapter 13: From the Community, What Imperial Students Actually Say
Chapter 14: Wellbeing Support Exists, Even Before You Arrive
Chapter 15: Prepping for Uni Before You Start

Part 2: Money Before You Arrive

Chapter 16: Scholarships, Bursaries & Funding, How to Actually Get Them
Chapter 17: Budgeting as a London Student
A Final Word

Part One of The Imperial Manifesto series

A Quick Word Before You Start

Everything outlined in this document is simply my opinion. It shouldn't be treated as fact, since these are all technically subjective. So to quote Bruce Lee, "take away what is useful and discard what is not." And a reminder, I don't know everything either, but I try my best.

My name is Khuselee. I was born in Mongolia and came to the UK to live in London when I was very young. As of the time of writing, I have just finished three years studying an MEng in Materials Science and Engineering. I've had four internships, I've started a business, I've earned over £30k so far. I was president of and started a calisthenics society, I gained positions within two of the largest societies within Imperial, I've done 17 muscle ups in a row, I read books, and I make content that goes semi viral in a particular niche.

I spent my first year completely broke. I travelled alone for the first time during my second year. I met some of the most driven and successful people my age. I've felt stupid and completely unqualified and behind. I've earned a 2:2 grade and changed my approach to get a higher grade. I've also felt the smartest and most qualified in a room. I've met some of the richest people my age having come from a background on free school meals and borrowing laptops to use. I have one more year left in university and I intend to make the most of it. These notes help me track myself, reevaluate my approach, and make sense of everything going on in my life, and hopefully inform and help others.

So far, during my time in university, I've learned, unlearned and rediscovered lots of new processes, mindset changes, and approaches to life, self development and success in achieving my goals. My goal has always been, since young, to achieve financial freedom in order to realise my true goal to build my character and achieve multiple lifestyles and freedom to go and do whatever I wish. I imagine a lot of people share this goal, or say they do. So I write these notes assuming we share the same goal.

Going to a top university like Imperial will undoubtedly change your life. I like to think reaching success is like being on a rollercoaster, and the track's trajectory, how high up or low down it is, is determined by your actions in the present. As they extend out like different plots on a graph, some choose to make it more exponential, some at a slower linear pace, and from these different rates of progression, wider and wider gaps form. You start to see why some people are destined to find success while others may not. In the very beginning the gap is almost unnoticeable and there appears to be no difference between person A and person B, but one does things more regularly, and that compounds and grows into a trajectory aimed at success.

Going to a top uni will introduce you to people, friends and networks who will discuss things you didn't consider, and it opens your mind to all the endless possibilities. Iron sharpens iron, and that holds true for ambitious people being friends with even more ambitious people. The famous saying, if you're the smartest person in the room, you're probably in the wrong room, is a very true statement within a top uni like Imperial. Many times in my life I have felt out of my depth and frankly stupid, but these offer chances to accelerate yourself and grow into a more successful version of yourself.

I imagine you're reading this to:

- get into your dream uni, which is most likely Imperial
- you're a fresher and want to understand and learn how to navigate uni life
- you just want to listen to someone going to one of the hardest unis in the world

All of these are fine and I hope to help you in your goals, but first a caveat.

If you fall into the first group, you must understand the nature of top universities. My personal list is Imperial, Oxbridge, UCL and LSE for the UK, and these are applied to by hundreds of thousands of students from countries all across the globe, not just the UK. Some courses may see 10+ applicants for each space. At a certain point you begin to understand why these unis have high entrance requirements, it's because they can afford to given the number of applicants. Even students with top grades will still get rejected, and in a lot of cases there's seemingly no good reason.

So if you don't get in, it's not because you're not good enough. You have to realise you were always qualified for it, and that mathematically and logistically, unis like Oxbridge, Imperial and LSE just can't take everyone who applies even if they wanted to. Lots of people are qualified and would thrive if given the chance, but not all of them will be given that chance. So if you end up somewhere that wasn't your first choice, keep your head high. It's not rejection, it's redirection. A lot of uni is purely what you decide to make of it, and this should also explain why plenty of people go to lower ranked or lesser known unis and still outperform some students at Oxbridge and Imperial.

I cannot promise you will get into Imperial just by reading this, but I can give you a much clearer picture of what Imperial is like, the patterns and trends of thinking and working in a top university, and things you can carry out yourself that will be applicable wherever you end up. My aim is to lessen the uncertainty that comes with this transition, give you a broader picture, and help you carry a head start that can begin compounding as soon as you start reading.

This particular guide, Getting Into Imperial, is written for exactly that first group: you're aiming to get in, whether to Imperial or another top UK university, and you want the real playbook, not recycled UCAS advice. It covers personal statements, admissions tests, interviews, course choice and results day, step by step, with worked examples pulled directly from my own application.

Now, on that note, let's begin.

Part 1: Getting In

Chapter 1: My Personal Journey

I was born in Mongolia and moved to London when I was two. I still remember having to learn how to write in English cursive, something that carries on with me to this day, much to the regret of everyone who reads my work. I was noted as shy yet curious, willing to speak when prompted by teachers. My family were very adamant on me doing well and eventually being successful as I grew older, as there was a constant need for me to do well since I wasn't a citizen of the UK, and so I felt I needed to work twice as hard to prove my value.

I was also sent to a normal state school, where my parents would have preferred a private or grammar school, but they had no funds for it. I guess they had enough problems on their plate as we moved houses over eight times growing up. I wasn't particularly noteworthy growing up and was often placed in the lower sets in early primary school, primarily due to me being quiet and reserved. It was only around Year 3 where I had a breakthrough, having my "talents" (purposeful quotation marks) noticed by a particular teacher. She must have seen how I was decent at maths and gave encouragement to a young, naive child with no sense of the world. This would then, unknowingly, mark the beginning of my true academic career, as it snowballed from there.

Around Year 4 I had moved house to a commute of nearly two hours each way. This required me waking up before or around 6am, and much to my internal amusement, I would wake up at the same time as my teachers, as they continuously lectured on how we, as primary school students, would never understand what that was like. I never raised this to them. I was always curious as a kid, I would read history books and loved the library and read children's books, but I had a natural affinity for being able to read history books meant for adults, as long as there were enough pictures for my vocabulary deficient mind. I constantly critiqued religion and belief in a god around that time too. My beliefs would later change as I entered university, but the point is that as a child I questioned a lot of things and thought seriously on some fairly weighty matters. The constant moving even reinforced my ability to remember new locations and move relatively independently, as sometimes I would have to commute by myself towards the end of primary school.

Chapter 2: The Olympiad & Supercurricular Playbook

I grew up in a free school in a state school, so doing things like Olympiads was never actively pushed forward. However, when it was put to my teachers, they adamantly recommended any competitions they could find for me. I entered my first with another girl from my primary school, the second smartest at the time, when I was in Year 5 or 6, and we both came in the lower half of places. The test was the first time I saw a test with a separate answer sheet, involving speeds, distances and volumes, which my school curriculum hadn't covered yet but everyone else in the Olympiad had already been taught independently. I forgot to use my answer sheet properly and had to stay behind to quickly copy down my answers, rushing towards the end, and I have no clue if I ended up losing marks from simply inefficient note taking. I was above her, but I still didn't dent the top place at all. I was happy at the time to have beaten my contemporary, but my father wanted more, he had high expectations. It showed me at the time that I was perhaps one of the hundred smartest students my age, though looking back now, maybe that only applied in that particular area of London.

I did another Olympiad in Year 7-8 and was one of the younger members. I had no idea what I was doing, as this one involved working in teams. We came in quite low, bottom 25% of the teams, and I remember my father being quietly disappointed, but I was just glad it was over, viewing it at the time as an annoying chore thrown on me by my parents since it wasn't compulsory. Looking back now, I'm glad the idea of competing in Olympiads was instilled in me early on, as I almost always viewed them as a natural part of my educational journey to try out.

Later on in sixth form, during Year 12, I participated in the Chemistry Olympiad and got a Bronze. I also competed in the Cambridge Chemistry Olympiad and achieved a Gold award, the highest in my year. I also tried my hand at the Physics Olympiad, even though my physics confidence was the lowest out of my three A-levels, and got a relatively decent score due to my basic logic and not giving in to exam pressure, though not medal worthy. I also did the UKMT 2022 Senior Maths Challenge and got a Silver. I was proud of that one, since I didn't do Further Maths, and everyone in Further Maths had to do it and get at least a Bronze, so it showed me I was always capable of learning it if I put my mind to it.

The EPQ Is Underrated

If your school offers the Extended Project Qualification, take it seriously, it's one of the most underrated ways to demonstrate real research technique. You pick a subject, usually genuinely any subject, and go niche on it: something in finance, chess, science, whatever you're actually drawn to. Doing that develops independent research skills, self-directed learning, and technical depth in a way normal A-level content structurally can't, since you're the one setting the question and finding the answer, not following a syllabus.

It's also a genuinely efficient use of time relative to the credential it gives you. An EPQ doesn't occupy anywhere near as much time as a full A-level, but it gives you a real, gradeable piece of independent work you can point to on your personal statement and talk about confidently in an interview. If you actually pick a subject you're curious about, it stops feeling like extra work and starts feeling like the one part of Year 12/13 that's genuinely yours.

Should You Take a Fourth A-Level?

At this stage, taking four A-levels is probably the more sensible default for anyone aiming at the most competitive courses and universities, rather than not. It's not the be-all and end-all, plenty of successful applicants get in with three, but a fourth subject (alongside or instead of an EPQ, depending on what

your school allows) is one more genuine signal of academic capacity in a pool of applicants who are almost all predicted top grades already. Weigh it against your own workload and mental health though, four A-levels done at 70% each is worse than three done properly.

> **Key takeaway:** Olympiads and supercurriculars are not just about winning. Even mediocre results build a habit of trying things outside the standard curriculum, and that habit is what shows up on your personal statement later. Ask your teachers what competitions exist in your subjects, even if you don't feel ready. Most of the value comes from entering, not from placing.

Chapter 3: Choosing a Degree

Why did I pick engineering? Simply put, I picked it due to doing Science and Maths A-levels, and it felt like a natural continuation of what I studied and was good at. Combined with the fact that not many people can do engineering, or STEM in general, to a high level. There was also outside influence to become an engineer given social perception and my Asian heritage. These are common reasons, and they shouldn't be the only ones for choosing engineering, since it's a genuinely hard degree by nature. I always caveat that I was passionate about learning new things and impressed by innovative technologies. I was motivated to learn it, interested in it, and had a good shot at being good at it as well. No other degree subject really interested me, and I didn't think it would open as many doors as engineering would.

Engineering, regardless of whether I ended up in it professionally or not, would change how my mind thinks for the better, teach me to tackle hard things, and manage a tough workload. If I wanted any shot at being successful, these were all skills I needed to develop. I decided not to study a pure science because I liked the practical applications of engineering in shaping the world, plus its natural links to economics when thinking as an engineer.

Three years into my MEng, I don't regret choosing engineering at all. I would say degrees within technical subjects that require them, medicine, sciences, engineering, are always going to be important and are the most likely to stand the test of time against AI automation. The raw skills these degrees give are always beneficial. No successful person regrets having done a STEM or engineering degree. A case can be made for economics too, given how many successful people studied it, but I'd argue that in this current era, being technically adept and thinking in an engineering mindset is a very useful skill given the AI revolution. I always think back to the idea that a STEM person can go into pretty much any role, but a humanities person can't as easily switch into STEM. So following that logic, I chose a STEM degree within engineering and aimed at the highest ranked unis for it.

From the same survey of 56 Imperial students, a few blunt, course-specific versions of this exact point:

> **[Physics]** *Only do physics if you want to do physics after.*
>
> **[Mechanical Engineering]** *Only do it if you actually have a passion for engineering, it's not worth it if you just want a well-paid job.*
>
> **[MSc Finance, Materials undergrad]** *The Materials course is very much like learning about ten different topics inside out. I wouldn't call it pure memorisation, but you switch gears a lot, it never felt like I had one cohesive understanding of the underlying principles, since they teach you each piece for the purpose of a specific application. If that bothers you too, consider another course.*

> **Key takeaway:** Pick a degree you're genuinely interested in, not just one that sounds impressive. But if you're stuck between multiple interests, weight your decision towards subjects that are harder to automate and harder to fake, since that optionality compounds over your career regardless of what you end up doing.

Chapter 4: A Personal Take on the Top UK Universities

Before anything else, a heavy disclaimer on this chapter specifically. Everything below is my personal opinion, formed from visiting these campuses, interviewing students for my content, meeting people at career events, and having friends across most of them. It is not objective fact, it's a snapshot from one person's perspective, and every single university here contains people who completely contradict whatever generalisation I make about it. Take what's useful, discard the rest, and please don't pick or reject a university purely off one student's take on the internet, including mine.

UCL

Ranked around 9th in the world by QS, and in 2022 I believe they were somehow ranked number one in London. Personally I don't think they're a top ten university globally, probably nearer the top twenty mark, and within the UK I'd personally place them fifth, after Oxbridge, Imperial and LSE.

UCL feels like the default goal for a lot of people, and I understand why. It's seen as a genuinely top university standing among peers like Imperial, while still retaining the image of an ideal student life. In some ways that's true. Students at UCL do look happier when I speak to them, and recruiters will generally place them in a similar bracket to Imperial students, which means you won't be turned down or underestimated on the face value of your university name. I also find UCL students tend to have relatively good work life balance, and a decent number of them are genuinely eager about startups, which I suspect comes from having a greater variety of courses and more time on their hands for things outside their degree.

The flip side, in my experience: it's less work intensive, and can feel a bit less serious. Speaking to Imperial and Oxbridge students versus UCL students, there is often a noticeable difference in how deep people go on their subject, though that's a generalisation with plenty of exceptions. Outside of their economics course and some of their STEM courses, a lot of the university feels fairly relaxed, and that leaves people more exposed in the current graduate job crisis. The UCL name won't limit you at all, but the people are a mixed bag. Some are genuinely innovative, hard working and comparable to anyone at Oxbridge or Imperial. Others are a reminder of why UCL is usually the first name to drop when people start stripping the list down to the very top.

KCL

Similar vibes to UCL. People seem happy, and the workload is clearly lighter than Oxbridge or Imperial level. It's a decent university, comparable to UCL but with the pattern slightly more exaggerated, where a minority of courses are noticeably more rigorous and produce sharper, more driven people, things like AI, Computing, and some of the maths and STEM courses.

The common criticism is too much partying and not enough seriousness. That's my personal take, and KCL like any university is genuinely what you make of it, but if you're someone with very high ambitions, it may not be the best fit. Firmly a semi-target, and not inherently limiting in any way.

LSE

The vibe is actually quite similar to Imperial, in that students are under a lot of pressure. The difference is that at LSE it's driven far more by internal competitiveness between peers than by the actual weight of the work itself.

Most LSE courses are humanities subjects and are naturally less technically rigorous, and this combines with the fact that LSE caters heavily to its student population (90%+ of whom are aiming at high finance) by keeping coursework and workload comparatively low. They even have a completely different grade classification system that lets students effectively discount nearly half their modules, or in some cases entire years, and still come out with a 2:1 or a first. It's optimised to the point where students use a site called BruvIgotafirst.com to calculate the minimum work required to still land a first.

That's why LSE produces so many firsts, and why their students have so much time to prepare for interviews and applications. Their internship standards are genuinely high, applying to the top banks, attending every finance networking event and career fair going. To them, not applying within a day of an internship opening counts as a late application. That's how prepared they are for breaking into the most competitive industries, even in the middle of a national graduate crisis.

The cons, honestly: going to LSE doesn't automatically guarantee a job, especially in high finance. They're often not technically adept, largely because they're neither studying technical degrees nor surrounded by peers who are. A very small minority do data science or maths, and even those courses rank lower nationally than you'd expect. That means LSE students can end up quite one-dimensional, and if they can't break into high finance or consulting, they're in a similar position to any other graduate right now.

The environment of ultra-competitiveness, constant LinkedIn monitoring and heavy image management also tends to produce a noticeable superiority complex. Most students I meet from other universities say they don't know anyone from LSE they actually like. I understand that, it took me a year to find LSE students I genuinely got along with. But I want to be fair here: this is very likely a vocal minority problem. You mostly encounter students from other universities at career fairs, which is exactly where the most boisterous, ego-driven characters show up, so you leave with a distorted sample. There are genuinely great people at LSE, and most of them are completely normal. I'd still argue there's a higher concentration of superiority complex and elitism there than almost anywhere else, possibly even higher than Oxbridge, which is genuinely surprising.

Very few LSE students pursue entrepreneurship, since most are deeply embedded in the corporate track by default. If that isn't what you want, you'll likely hate it there. There's also a high degree of performative LARPing, which puts some people off, though I'll be fair and say that being able to speak confidently is a genuine skill regardless.

Imperial

My university. Ranked second in the world by QS for three consecutive years, interestingly starting right around when I joined (so maybe correlation equals causation, who knows). Personally, I don't agree with that ranking. I think we're definitely top three in the UK, but probably not first just yet, and top ten globally, probably somewhere in the six to ten range rather than second.

Ranking nuances aside, the point stands: Imperial is definitively a top university. Within the UK it's frequently placed alongside Oxbridge, though less so internationally.

From my own perspective as a student here, we have a lot going for us. Extremely smart students, I constantly feel outperformed and frankly stupid in comparison. Very high workload and a strong technical base, for context, our first year course content was reportedly harder than second year UCL physics exams. A decent startup base, though it could honestly be much better than it currently is. A great university for quant specifically, and therefore for pretty much any hard, competitive career you want to break into. Nobody will look down on you for going to Imperial, at least not in the UK. Good

international links, good funding, good facilities, and genuinely strong opportunities like IC Hack, student societies and events. Situated in one of the nicest areas of London. It was ranked the most employable university in the country, which makes sense, the stereotype about the intense work focus is true, and it shows in the outcomes.

The cons. It's expensive, South Kensington is the priciest area of an already expensive city, and while Imperial's funding is genuinely good and they do give students a lot of financial support, that doesn't erase the underlying cost.

Imperial students also often have low EQ. There are several reasons for this: people who get into Imperial were generally the "nerds" growing up, more likely to be socially marginalised, and they carry those patterns into university. The workload can also be genuinely excessive depending on your course, to the point it starts eating into time for social life, events, internship applications and side projects, all of which I'd argue matter a lot, since you don't want to end up one-dimensional in this job market.

That said, these are relatively minor. Imperial students generally don't carry a major superiority complex, in theory they should be smart enough to know better, and they're far less focused on carefully curating an image than students at LSE. They're very smart and can handle a brutal workload. Interestingly, medics are widely considered the most unserious students here, they're the closest thing to sixth form culture at Imperial, with constant drama within their course (for context, I haven't witnessed or taken part in serious drama since sixth form) and a lot more partying than other courses.

The biggest stereotype is that Imperial people are completely dead to talk to. That isn't really true. There are plenty of people here who are genuinely cool, chill and great to be around. I'd say this is more of a marketing and image problem than a reality problem, and the image that's been created is honestly horrible. Most of my friends now are from Imperial and I'm genuinely glad I met them and came here.

On costs, I might be a rare case, but Imperial has always helped me with funding, and I've never felt unsupported when I actually needed it. The bigger issue is that they don't hold your hand at all. Unlike Oxbridge's small-group tutorial system with constant reinforcement, Imperial is extremely hands-off and independent. Some students find there's no support and they're left entirely to their own devices. I understand that criticism, but I also see the upside, it reflects life after university far more accurately, and it forces you to be proactive about pursuing what you want, including chasing a social life even when it isn't handed to you (it definitely exists here, you just have to go find it). Maybe that independence is part of why Imperial is the most employable university.

I've also met some of the most genuinely entrepreneurial and actually successful people I know here. There's still real room for improvement in how Imperial pushes opportunities and recognition around self-starting and entrepreneurship, compared to somewhere like MIT, Harvard or Stanford. But I think that's only a matter of time. Every year I'm here, I notice the intake getting more competitive, and therefore smarter, more capable and more switched-on students arriving each year.

If you're reading this as a sixth former or a fresher, Imperial is a very solid choice with very few real downsides, and for most people it's genuinely the best option available.

Maybe sometime after I've graduated, Imperial will fully live up to its name and become a true global household name, recognisable to everyone the way Oxbridge, MIT and Harvard already are.

QMUL

It won't be an insult to say this is the lowest ranked of the universities I've interviewed at. The main reason is that students generally come in with lower grades and are less academically strong on average, and the location near Whitechapel in East London probably doesn't help its image either.

That said, when I went there, I met people doing genuinely great things, and honestly the gap between QMUL, KCL and even UCL isn't as wide as people assume. I've met Queen Mary students at spring weeks, students who landed competitive banking offers, and famously one who secured a NASA internship, which might be the single most impressive internship I've ever come across while making my videos.

All of that proves the point I keep coming back to: if your mindset is geared toward success and you find your people, you will succeed. QMUL doesn't automatically lower your ceiling, it just makes it harder to see how high you could aim.

Warwick

Very nice campus. Maybe I timed my visit perfectly, but when I went during exam season to record videos, May Day was happening, there were events and student activities everywhere, and it gave off a genuinely nice student community vibe.

A lot of students there can be described as "normal," with a healthy balance of genuinely switched-on people building startups, going into Apple, landing Optiver internships and similar. Surprisingly, I felt a real kinship with a lot of Warwick students. Many were home students I could relate to, with shared experiences and probably similar grades growing up, we just ended up at different institutions.

There's a big focus on securing internships, and I see Warwick students at essentially every career event I've been to. They're very proactive, and while not in the elite Oxbridge or Imperial bracket, the student culture doesn't limit you at all. Firmly a semi-target that genuinely punches above its weight a lot of the time.

Oxford

A genuinely elite university, and by far the most "different" university I've ever visited. The people there stand out noticeably from everywhere else. Everyone I met had excellent EQ, could express their thoughts clearly, was obviously knowledgeable and often deeply passionate about their subject.

Their 1:1 tutorial format means students are, on average, able to speak eloquently and link ideas together in a way that's genuinely distinctive. The way Oxford teaches, and the small things others don't do, formals, tutorial groups, the quiet atmosphere, colleges each with their own libraries, being outside London, all combine to produce something close to an ideal environment for a researcher.

Oxford and Cambridge both carry international recognition that's genuinely unparalleled. There's a reason so many politicians, heads of state and highly successful people come out of them. It produces a calibre of student ready to hold their own against anything, and who can work hard and diligently as a default.

They're not as technically strong as Imperial students, since Imperial is purely STEM, and the university can feel a bit too elitist at times. But those are minor critiques. Going to Oxford is clearly a life-changing experience, and in some ways almost a magical place. Their funding is also excellent, rivalling if not beating Imperial's. For reference, Oxford has a bursary of around £1000 that can only be used for travel, you are quite literally being paid to go on holiday.

Cambridge

The university I could have gone to. I've never recorded interviews there yet, but I've visited multiple times. Similar to Oxford, it has that same ideal-researcher atmosphere, students work genuinely hard, there's a strong STEM focus, an almost identical teaching style, and the same international recognition. In some ways you could argue Cambridge is a perfect blend of Imperial and Oxford.

A lot of people say Cambridge students are more approachable than Oxford students. Maybe slightly, but honestly at times I don't see much difference, and that's fairly subjective anyway.

Cambridge is a genuinely top tier university, and despite what QS rankings say, I don't believe Imperial should be placed above it. On par, maybe. Below, arguably. But to say Imperial is definitively better is just wrong in my view. Saying Cambridge is number two in the UK is a bit of an unfair oversimplification. Universities like Cambridge, Oxford and Imperial are a level above everyone else, and whether they're ranked one, two or three in a given year doesn't really matter that much.

Maybe I'm giving these two too much praise as an outsider looking in. But from what I've seen, and comparing directly against the Imperial students I'm around every single day, Oxford and Cambridge were the most impressive of the lot, the most equally footed with us, and frequently better. That should give you some idea.

> **Key takeaway:** Every generalisation in this chapter has exceptions, and I've met genuinely exceptional people at every single one of these universities, including the ones I've been most critical of. Use this as a rough feel for the culture and environment you'd be walking into, not as a ranking of your worth or your ceiling. The person you become is far more determined by what you do once you're there than by which name ends up on your degree.

Chapter 5: GCSEs

I was noted as smart towards the end of primary school. I did my GCSEs during Covid, so I had some element of Teacher Assessed Grades, but I still had to sit exams and needed to do well on them. I achieved 999998777. Objectively, this is considered good, but within Imperial and Oxbridge level circles, this is a fairly standard set of GCSE grades, and achieving all 9s is fairly regular. To caveat this, I knew quite a few people in sixth form who achieved all 9s, and I remember believing it was an indicator they were "smarter" than me, but a lot of these people didn't end up at Imperial or Oxbridge level unis.

What happens is that students who go to good, private or selective schools generally have a higher baseline grade average, shifting the curve towards higher grades and increasing the number of students achieving top marks. For reference, my GCSE grades in secondary school were 4th best out of 160 students, and no one in our school achieved all 9s. The highest grades went to me, going to Imperial, and the rest either decided not to go to university or didn't end up at top universities. My secondary school had roughly 50% of its students on free school meals, so it definitely qualified as one of the lower performing state schools, meaning achieving top grades there is arguably more impressive than achieving all 9s at a well funded school heavily set up to prepare its students.

The point of this backdrop is that getting all 9s or standout grades at GCSE isn't necessary, and isn't necessarily an indicator you're guaranteed a place at a top uni. Obviously it would probably increase your chances, and learning to aim high in your final exams is a good skill to develop alongside all the revision and content absorption that helps you at A-level. So don't slack off, but don't feel left out if you don't get the best grades.

Going through secondary school, I went through a dry spell with my grades, where in Year 9 my parents' evening revealed my predicted grades were 5s and 6s, which for an Asian household is simply unacceptable. Covid then happened when I was in Year 10, and I spent most of my learning inside my house. Most people have bad memories of lockdown and consider it a time of regression, but for me it was a time of catching up and advancement. I was one of the few who looked over all the revision material given to us by my teachers, and I entered Year 11 primed and ready to learn all the new material. My triple science grades improved from 6s to 7s, 8s and 9s.

Maths used to lag at grade 7-8, as I could never seem to answer the final six markers properly. I remember watching a YouTube video going step by step through previous maths GCSE past papers, and it opened my eyes to learning all the new content. I spent my Easter break looking through videos and understanding the material from the basics, becoming able to answer the final questions comfortably. I needed teacher supervision to explain vectors to me, but after that I was fully primed to get a 9, which I did.

English absolutely sucked for me ever since Year 7. I couldn't wrap my numbers based, analytical brain around the creative ways of English, analysing quotes and pulling inferences out of thin air to describe the colour of a door. It felt like trying to learn magic, and writing English essays that achieved "good" marks was always a struggle for me, averaging a 5-6. I spent a good amount of time listening intently in lessons, writing my own essays, revising questions, and getting teachers to mark my independent work and give me feedback. I managed to struggle through and get a 7 in both English Literature and English Language, which converts to an A grade, so I was reasonably satisfied at the time.

For me, Business Studies, RS and History were all easy, and I got 9s in them. I mainly attribute this to being naturally interested in religion through religious debate, studying history as a hobby all my life, and Business being very intuitive after attending a few extra revision sessions. One thing I've noticed

between someone who gets very good GCSE grades and someone who doesn't, is understanding how predictable GCSE exams are and recognising the patterns. There are patterns for dates, question templates and answer structures in history, business, English and RS. Maths is formulaic and pattern based by nature, and so is triple science. It boils down to the basics, spending time revising, making use of teacher feedback and supervision (a literal resource bank for how to get marks), and doing effective learning at home using the internet or online tools to cover your weak spots.

Growing up I never had a tutor. I think it's a mixture of naturally being smart, and being decently good at paying attention and using teacher feedback to rectify mistakes by looking at mark schemes. But if you do need a tutor, use them by asking lots of questions, and try to lead the session by providing questions you were stuck on and asking them to explain things you want to know how to do. Don't just sit there passively. The tutor is giving you their time, and you have the opportunity to pull from their brain to add to yours. I say this having tutored students myself.

> **Key takeaway:** GCSEs are pattern based subjects rewarding consistent revision and use of teacher feedback, not raw intelligence. All 9s isn't required for a top uni offer, context matters more than people think, but the habits you build chasing good grades here, using feedback properly and identifying patterns, carry directly into A-levels and beyond.

Chapter 6: A-Levels

You do not absolutely need to do four or five A-levels, but it may increase your chances, as lots of Imperial students, especially within Aero, JMC and Computing, will have done four. Most people have done Further Maths as well, I wasn't one of them. I remember my favourite teacher in my regular state school telling me to pursue four A-levels to show what I could do, and to a certain extent he may have been correct. I ended up leaving to go to a more prestigious sixth form college, where I originally planned to do four but dropped my fourth, History, as it was too different to the style of History teaching I was used to for GCSE, which favoured more memorisation and less writing technique. I stuck with Maths, Chemistry and Physics, and still semi wish I'd picked Further Maths as a fourth in those days. It didn't matter too much doing three A-levels with no Further Maths, since I received both Imperial and Cambridge offers, but adding Further Maths would likely still have helped, given I was rejected from Imperial Chemical Engineering despite being accepted into the highest ranked uni for the course. I was also rejected from UCL Chemical Engineering, though I suspect that was more due to my personal statement being tailored more towards academics than extracurriculars, and I suspect UCL uses a randomiser for their selection anyway.

Due to personal events at the time, I performed pretty poorly in my UCAS exams and only managed A*AA, which is on the lower end for top institutions. However, I had a good relationship with my maths teacher, who was also my personal tutor and wrote my teacher reference. He gave a very concise but punchy reference. I also attended an Oxbridge academy within my college, which prided itself on focusing select students on getting into Oxbridge. They sorted us based on predicted grades and regularly encouraged us to do supercurriculars in our own time, tracking it closely. I was lacklustre with it at the time, thinking it was long, tedious work, and I was a very typical "learn what was taught to me" type student who couldn't really do much notable outside of it. Nevertheless, it taught me the importance of learning to do more independent self study and research, and I tried. I attended a few webinars on Chemical Engineering at Cambridge and went to some laboratory tours with my Chemistry Society.

The point of this is to be proactive within your school and take advantage of all the resources it offers. As a third year student now, looking back, I can see these were perfect jumping points that padded my personal statement and gave me greater context and exposure to university style teaching, content, and actual insight into what students with no idea of what they want to do actually need. The biggest issue in sixth form and applying to unis is that you don't really know what the course is like, what the uni is like, the campus, the people. You can only look through tinted glass from the sidelines and hope it's the right choice. Some recommendations I'd give to broaden your context: look at lectures online and give them a watch. Most content in uni, to be honest, isn't too difficult from A-level, there's just more of it, so the focus is more on being able to learn new information and apply your basic skillset properly in new subject specific applications as you go through the course. Don't view watching lecture content or doing some pre-reading as insanely difficult or above your expertise, you'd probably be able to understand most things if briefly explained to you. Especially with the rise of AI, self study and quickly educating yourself on topics has exploded, and you as a sixth former, or even earlier, should be able to comfortably learn and get the gist of any course you're interested in.

One of the challenges I faced was not knowing all the courses available, and not understanding the difference between Chemical Engineering, Mechanical, Design Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering, and so on. Given uni will be your next three to four years at least, you should give it a good run through when picking the right course and having a good idea of what to expect. This will ease your

transition to uni life and help you draw from your own interests and experiences when writing your personal statement and doing interviews.

Good teachers will proactively try to help you and nurture you, because they know that you being slightly smarter, slightly more passionate, more ambitious, will put you on the right trajectory to be exactly the type of student a given university wants. You just need to sit on the right rollercoaster and ride the wave to your final destination.

Two students who'd actually sat these specific admissions tests put it this way:

> **[Maths]** *If you get a good enough score in the TMUA you'll be golden, 99% of effort should be put towards that. A good enough score can outshine any other imperfection. Start banging out past papers from every source on the planet as soon as your Year 12 exams finish, maths is maths no matter the exam board. You will suck at the beginning, then you will be good with time, that's the case for everyone.*
>
> **[Physics]** *Just do lots of practice for ESAT, that's the main thing. Start early so you don't have lots of papers to cram.*

> **Key takeaway:** Further Maths is worth taking if you can, even if it's not strictly required, since it strengthens both your Maths and Physics and signals seriousness to admissions tutors. Get involved in whatever your school offers, webinars, society tours, taster lectures, even half-heartedly, since these become genuine material for your personal statement and interviews later.

Chapter 7: The UCAS Journey

In the end, four of my applications went to top ten world universities. I didn't really count my final application to KCL. No offence to it, my sister went there and it's still a good university, but I just felt I was destined for something else, and I was willing to take all the risk for the outcome I wanted. At the time, getting any one of my four would have made me happy, so I applied regardless of how competitive they were. They still have to let people in, and I believed I could be that person.

I remember during UCAS season, we were made to sit through talks from different unis about aspects of the journey: unis, courses, personal statements. One speaker from Nottingham mentioned how there were far more applications to a course at LSE than the same course at Cambridge. The reason was that far fewer students believed in themselves enough to apply to Cambridge, meaning statistically you'd have had a better chance getting into Cambridge than LSE for that course. What I took from that was to always believe in yourself and act with conviction, especially when it matters.

Chapter 8: The Personal Statement

This is usually the single biggest source of stress for anyone applying to a top university, so it gets its own chapter rather than being buried inside the UCAS process. Below is my own process for writing mine, what a survey of 56 current Imperial students said actually worked, and a full worked example, my own statement, word for word, with a line-by-line breakdown of why it worked.

My Own Process

When I first learned about the concept of a personal statement, I imagined creating one of the most competitive, beautifully written pieces in the country, redrafted endlessly until every letter was in the exact right place. In reality, I ended up with a very rough first draft in late summer, which my friend sat me down and told me, directly and soberly, was pure dogshit. This was before ChatGPT was mainstream, so I had to manually write and come up with my own hooks, introductions, vocabulary and structure. We were given up to 4000 characters including spaces.

I used every resource available at the time, since I had to submit mine earlier due to applying to Cambridge. My decision to apply to Cambridge was genuinely mixed. My rational brain said there was no chance, that it would be a wasted application slot, and applying earlier would be a hassle for diminishing returns. I wasn't the smartest student, wasn't the most proactive, and part of my mind had convinced me I was simply inadequate. At the start of UCAS season, in Chemistry I was second smartest in my class (the first got into Imperial), in Maths I was maybe joint first, and in Physics I was in one of the smartest classes in college but probably average within it, averaging around 50% on topic tests in Year 12 and needing extra supervised study.

The other side of my mind said to take the chance, that you only live once, and you only get one shot at deciding whether to apply to Oxbridge. I spoke to my older sister for advice, and she told me to give it a go. I initially planned to devote proper time and scheduling to my personal statement, but life happened, I procrastinated, and I ended up rushing it, since my internal college deadline was over a month earlier than the official Oxbridge deadline. This left me with roughly two weeks to create a proper personal statement at the start of Year 13.

Everyone's decision, my sisters, my parents, was for me to make my statement in that window and apply to Cambridge. The decision had effectively been taken away from me. I let my teachers and my sister, who studied History and had strong written communication skills, proofread and offer suggestions. I used every possible resource and part of my network for this. I would finish my lessons in the day, move to the library during free periods, and work through edits after every round of feedback via email. In the end I managed to put together something that could pass as an Oxbridge statement, but it only came through an absolute grind. Those two weeks were one of the few moments in my life where I can confidently say I utilised my max brainpower and worked like an absolute machine.

I left those two weeks with a personal statement covering my interest in engineering, chemical engineering, technology and materials science, tailored to everything I was applying for. Luckily, the Materials Science and Engineering course was lenient in allowing a brief inclusion of niche subject matter that could double up for other courses. Materials Science is only offered at Oxford, Imperial, QMUL and Birmingham, so for me the choice was clear: apply mainly for Chemical Engineering at top universities, and Materials at Imperial. In fact, I was mainly intending to become a chemical engineer at first, since I found working with processes and scaling small scale problems to large scale ones very interesting. However, on my Imperial open day, the Materials Science department and its demonstrations spoke to me, and I found it too interesting not to apply.

Both Materials Science and Chemical Engineering favoured my subject combination of Maths, Chemistry and Physics. At the time I felt weakest in Physics, so I was turned off Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, leaning more towards Maths and Chemistry. Interestingly, nowadays I'm far more confident with Physics, which shows how different uni content can be from A-level topics.

After submitting my personal statement, I had to wait. I had an entrance exam for Cambridge, which at the time was the NSAA, and I picked Maths and Chemistry questions. I did brief revision, maybe a week's worth of past papers spread over two months, which shows you how lacklustre I can sometimes be. It was a challenging exam, multiple choice with usually 8-9 options each, so guessing wasn't wise, and each question was like three or four regular A-level questions combined. It was doable, but the time was very short for a test of that nature, so I had to rush towards the end. I left just glad it was over, still convinced my Cambridge application was a shot in the dark.

The first news I got from UCAS was that my Imperial Chemical Engineering application had been rejected, about a month or two after submitting. I was still hopeful of getting an offer somewhere, but it sobered me and reminded me it's a genuinely difficult task to get into a top university. I then got news I had an interview for Materials at Imperial, and they gave me prep materials the day before.

Rushing a personal statement under pressure is not ideal, but it is survivable if you use every resource around you, teachers, siblings, friends, and are willing to redraft relentlessly in a short window. Believing you're "not qualified enough" to apply somewhere ambitious is extremely common and usually wrong. Apply anyway, since the worst outcome is simply a no.

On personal statements: what actually worked

A clear theme across nearly every strong response was specificity over generic work experience. A few real examples:

- One Electronic & Information Engineering student wrote about visiting a cement factory in Bangladesh and researched how electrification of the process could reduce lung disease risk, "mostly waffled but it was unique."
- One Materials student structured their entire personal statement as three mini literature reviews on topics they found genuinely interesting: reversing glacial melting, mycelium packaging, and solid-state batteries.
- One Mechanical Engineering student linked a work experience placement to Senna's F1 accident to discuss ethics and environmental impact, and linked their EPQ on the knuckleball effect to research on fluid mechanics and biomimetic engineering, "I made so many drafts and just kept iterating until I got to a point where I gained enough confidence to push back against certain types of criticism."

As one Biochemistry student put it: *"Show integrative thinking, generally useful to have one coherent string throughout your application. Identify the passion or why you're interested in this course then connect scientific concepts you've gleaned from your outside reading. They wanna see scientific thinking, even if you don't have work experience, reading books or talking about a specific research paper you found interesting helps."*

A Full Worked Example: My Own Personal Statement

Everything above describes the theory. Here's the actual proof: my own personal statement, word for word, from my 2023 UCAS application. This exact document earned offers from both Cambridge

(Chemical Engineering) and Imperial (Materials Science and Engineering), the same “shot in the dark” application described back in Chapter 7.

The Statement, Word for Word

In 2019, I visited Mongolia where I saw how burning fossil fuels was causing deadly pollution on the city and made me realise the importance of a carbon neutral world. It was this experience that sparked my interest in the application of chemistry and physics in solving real world problems. Through a Cambridge subject taster, I learned about hydrogen fuel cells and its potential to help us reach net zero moreover it showed me how engineers work with innovative technologies that can change the world and inspired me to learn more about this course.

To delve deeper I listened to an audible book of “Stuff Matters” by Mark Miodownik, which explained how the materials around us we take for granted such as in a simple spoon are cleverly engineered. The fact that a spoon has no taste is due to the addition of chromium inside the iron crystals which forms chromium oxide and covers the steel underneath to form an invisible, protective layer, the “passive layer,” so your tongue never actually touches the spoon. It even reforms if a scratch occurs as more chromium atoms within the alloy metal bind with oxygen. This specific chromium and steel alloy is what makes stainless steel unable to rust. This intrigued me as the slight change in the chemical makeup created a material that is so useful in our modern world. I also came upon a BBC science focus article about new carbon capture designs that can be fitted on trains. Current systems use fans to draw in air and neutralise the CO2 with an alkali forming a carbonate salt that is separated into a calciner to be thermally decomposed to obtain pure CO2 gas. Using trains would remove the energy intensive fans and each unit can capture in one year the same emissions of 250 family cars over their lifespan. The CO2 can be used in several ways such as being bonded with Hydrogen to make carbon neutral fuels or stored underground. This piqued my interest into chemical engineering, and I took a Harvard edX course on “Energy and Thermodynamics”. In the first law, I learnt that by keeping one property constant, it changes the way you apply the equation W=Q+W. Such as in isobaric processes where pressure is constant, and adding heat can increase the volume. This allows it to do work by combining the pressure formula with work done to make $W=P\Delta V$. Although tricky at first, I loved applying what I knew from A-level to new concepts. In the summer, I attended the Sutton Trust programme in Imperial where we worked in the labs with new equipment such as vacuum filtration and gas generating and collection systems. It gave me great insight into university style lab work and how crucial teamwork will be for my degree and beyond.

Whilst studying chemistry A-level, I learnt about the Haber process and fractional distillation of crude oil. It highlighted to me the importance of efficiency in industry to reduce economic costs and maximise production of the desired product, which is fundamental to a chemical engineer. I also particularly enjoy the problem-solving aspect of the subject and participated in C3L6 achieving a gold-the highest in my year. Taking maths has introduced me to topics such as calculus where differentiation is used in engineering to predict continuous change. It’s also a necessary skill to process the data in problems whether it be the mass of reactants or help me to learn python. Physics A-level has furthered my critical thinking through using various formula such as the Young's Modulus to solve a question and explaining that concepts such as the conservation of energy works despite how it may go against our initial observations. It has also presented to me entirely new concepts such as particle physics which took time but managed to grasp. The jump to university is hard but I will be suited to take them on.

Outside of education, I did DofE and had to complete my sections during lockdown, although it severely hindered the programme, I found suitable activities that I could do at home to help me prepare and ultimately pass my DofE Bronze. I also completed NCS which helped develop my confidence on working with new people and presenting in front of large audiences. I also regularly workout, originally starting in martial arts, the rigorous training enhanced my self-discipline and taught me the importance of staying active and leaving my comfort zone.

Line-by-Line Breakdown: What Each Paragraph Is Actually Doing

- **Paragraph 1, the opening hook:** Opens with a dated, real, personal experience ("In 2019, I visited Mongolia…") rather than a generic "I've always loved science" line. It then names a specific programme (a Cambridge subject taster) and a specific technology (hydrogen fuel cells) rather than speaking about engineering in the abstract. This is the exact "specificity over generic work experience" pattern flagged at the top of this section.
- **Paragraph 2, technical depth through reading:** Names a real book (Stuff Matters by Mark Miodownik) and, crucially, doesn't just cite it, it explains the actual mechanism: chromium binding with oxygen to form a self-healing passive layer. Same again with the BBC Science Focus article on train-mounted carbon capture, the mechanism (fans, alkali neutralisation, a calciner) and a real number (250 family cars' worth of emissions per unit per year) are both included. This mirrors the same principle behind the Materials student's three mini literature reviews mentioned above, technical depth is what proves genuine comprehension rather than name-dropping a source.
- **Paragraph 2, continued, applying it further:** The Harvard edX "Energy and Thermodynamics" course reference goes one step further than most supercurricular mentions, it derives an actual equation ($W=P\Delta V$ from the first law, $W=Q+W$, under isobaric conditions) instead of just naming the course. The Sutton Trust programme reference then closes the paragraph by connecting theory back to hands-on lab experience, showing the interest wasn't purely academic.
- **Paragraph 3, tying A-levels back to the degree:** Every A-level subject is linked to a specific transferable skill rather than just listed: the Haber process and fractional distillation to industrial efficiency thinking, calculus to predicting continuous change and processing data, Young's Modulus and conservation of energy to critical thinking. The C3L6 gold mention is kept to a single clause, evidence, not the headline.
- **Paragraph 4, extracurriculars kept brief:** DofE, NCS and martial arts get one short paragraph, not a page. Notice the honesty too, lockdown "severely hindered" the DofE programme rather than pretending it went smoothly, which reads as more credible than a polished, conflict-free version would.

What To Actually Take From This

- **Open with a real, dated moment,** not a generic statement of interest. "In 2019, I visited Mongolia…" does more work in one line than "I have always been passionate about engineering" does in a paragraph.
- **Explain the mechanism, don't just cite the source.** Naming a book, article or course is worth very little on its own. Explaining the equation, the chemical process, or the number behind it is what actually signals understanding to an admissions tutor.
- **Tie every A-level subject to a specific transferable skill,** not a generic "this taught me problem solving" line. Name the actual topic and the actual skill it maps onto.

- **Keep extracurriculars to one short paragraph,** positioned as supporting evidence, not the main pitch. If it's taking up more space than your technical content, it's probably too long.
- **Find the shared thread when tailoring across two courses,** rather than writing two statements glued together. This statement doesn't separate “the Materials bit” from “the Chemical Engineering bit”, the chromium example and the carbon capture example both sit under one coherent theme: materials and processes solving real world problems.

> **Key takeaway:** A strong personal statement isn't about sounding impressive, it's about proving you actually understood what you read. Every technical detail in the example above (the equation, the mechanism, the real number) is doing more work than any adjective could. If you take one thing from this worked example, make it this: don't just say what you read, show that you understood it well enough to explain it back.

Chapter 9: Interviews

Now you already know I did interviews with both Cambridge and Imperial, so I'll discuss my prep process cumulatively. I would reach out to my teachers, and they would give me a mock interview or point me towards free online prep resources or other teachers who'd be better suited for a mock. I'd usually try to do at least a couple of mock interviews beforehand for every interview I have. The way I see it, practise in the lead up to an important exam or interview is my playground to make as many mistakes as possible, so I can identify and fix them in time. Truth be told, most mock interviews I did left me thinking I was completely finished, since I was stumped on too many of the questions asked. But this also meant there was now a direction to follow, an objective to reach. I had to learn where I went wrong and what type of thinking and problem solving I needed to be adept in.

Usually for interviews to succeed, roughly a third is standard questions or problem types that are always repeated and simply need to be learned. Another third is placed on how you communicate and how passionate you seem. And the final third is just your natural ability, who you are, and how you respond to new information and unfamiliar context. So most of the interview, around two thirds, can be prepped for and secured to tilt things in your favour.

Oxbridge interviews, I knew, were heavily placed on how you think and respond to unfamiliar challenges. I'd already accepted going in that you shouldn't leave an Oxbridge interview feeling elated, in fact that would probably be worse. So I tried to be mindful of conveying my thought process clearly, as a form of soft preparation. Oxbridge interviews are also purely academic, testing you with no motivational element, which looking back now, maybe that's for the better. I've always found motivational questions slightly pretentious and flawed. Imperial interviews, like other unis, do have a motivational element.

For my Imperial interview, I had to research a particular material and talk about it in depth. I chose graphene, since it seemed the most interesting to me after reading *Stuff Matters* (great book, by the way). I did brief research and used my memory and note taking ability in the morning to write and practise on the commute to Imperial. I was given a one to one interview with a professor, asked very straightforward technical questions, such as finding the distance between opposite corners of a cube, alongside questions about my personal statement and motivation. Other people got harder questions, like scaling a tiny microtransistor to the size of a city, luck of the draw for me I guess. For estimation questions like these, the key is to work from first principles, be creative and logical at the same time, and trust your instincts with probabilities and fractions. Explain your thought process clearly out loud as you go, mention any bits of information you already know that you can compare against, and identify what figures or data you'd actually need to solve it properly. You can ask the interviewer for a specific number or value if you need one, or just explicitly state a guess, "I think it's roughly this much", since they're generally looking for your method and what you're trying to identify, not the raw final answer. After a few hours of practise, these questions become quite straightforward, even slightly fun to do.

I had two Cambridge interviews, each with two interviewers. The first was for Chemistry, and it started badly before it even began, I ran into a severe technical issue on my sister's computer where I was accidentally muted for four minutes straight. A great way to get stressed out right before one of the most important interviews of my life. Once it was sorted, I was given an arbitrary problem: measure the CO_2 digestion rate of a bacteria sample. I worked from first principles, essentially the experimental science knowledge I'd built up from A-level Chemistry problems and lab practicals in both Physics and Chemistry, identifying a dependent and independent variable, describing clearly how I'd use a container to measure the amount of CO_2 digested over time, running a CO_2 test to measure the amount of carbon

left, and varying the concentration of the bacteria sample, while making sure I included a control experiment. Their feedback was that I could also have thought to measure the O2 rate as well. A second person then joined the call and ran me through a set of easy, formulaic chemistry questions, which were very manageable. So despite being completely thrown off by the technical glitch at the start, I got through the Chemistry interview fine.

For my second interview, Engineering and Maths, I remember overhearing the interviewers mention at the start that I'd come from Mongolia when I was young, a small thing, but it told me they genuinely take your background and personal story into account, not just the technical answers. I was first asked to draw a force diagram of an ice cube sitting in a glass of water, before being asked the actual question: would the water level increase or decrease when an ice cube melts in a glass of water? I said it would decrease, since the ice cube is less dense but loses some volume when it melts. I was then invited to walk through the problem step by step with my interviewer, where we worked through the densities mathematically, and I proved myself wrong, the volume actually stays the same. At the time I felt like a dunce, but looking back, it showed my ability to correct myself when steered slightly in the right direction, which is a good sign of adaptability, staying calm under pressure, and being able to take on new information to fix my answer, as well as being teachable, which is the main thing Oxbridge wants to see.

A second person then joined that same call, more maths focused, and gave me four random graphs to match up with four equations. Again, I worked from first principles, since that's all I really had from A-level knowledge, looking at the y-intercept and grasping at any maths topic I could relate it to, trying to infer which graph matched which equation. I got the first two right, but got the other two wrong. He started talking me through how to work them out, and I nodded along, listening intently and showing visible understanding as he walked me through the solutions. Even though I got it wrong, I still showed I could be taught, and could be easily steered in the right direction once given the missing context.

Is it possible to LARP your way through an interview? Give yourself a chance, and rely on your base knowledge. You must either be crazy competent, hella enthusiastic, or preferably both. Most likely more of both, since you want to get into Imperial. I would pick to invest in the humanities student who is more enthusiastic and passionate about learning technology, over someone who did Maths A-level and doesn't care to learn anything new or progress past that point.

> **Key takeaway:** Roughly two thirds of any interview is preparable: standard question types and how well you communicate. Practise until you're comfortable being wrong in front of someone and correcting yourself live, since that's often what interviewers are actually testing for, not whether you already know the answer.

Chapter 10: Getting the Offer

My UCAS grades were actually one A* below the course entry requirements for Cambridge, they asked for A*A*A and I had A*AA, but they still gave me an interview, likely due to the entrance exam, which I may have performed well enough on to make up for my grades. I got the offer in January. Me, the one going through a lot of troubled circumstances at the time, which took a toll on my mental health, who had flunked their UCAS exams, and who was an average student in the physics class, had managed to put together one of the best UCAS applications in my entire school cohort.

Some of the reasons behind this:

I gave myself a chance. One of the smartest physics students I knew in my cohort, who learned about time dilation theory in his spare time while I could barely make sense of Newton's third law, decided to retract his Oxbridge application after submitting it, effectively wasting one of his five UCAS slots. He said he couldn't bear to see the decision, so he pulled out prematurely. There are many people like him who wouldn't even apply in the first place, given the name of the uni and the aura around it, underestimating themselves. Truth be told, I underestimated myself too, and only applied to Cambridge because of coercion from my family. So sometimes you have to rely on other people's belief in you and give yourself a shot. At the end of the day, what's the worst that can happen? They say no. But the upside is you get an offer.

Good support from school. They were very supportive in providing interview practise, checking in afterwards on how it went, and giving me attention around my interview dates, as well as having an Oxbridge academy in place. Out of 750 students in my year, I was one of 26 who ended up earning an Oxbridge offer.

I was decently good at interviews. I practised well, spoke clearly, and could convey my ideas succinctly. I came across as likeable, partly because I'd spent a decent amount of time developing my EQ compared to the average high IQ nerd with zero social skills. I also showed I was teachable, which the ice cube story demonstrates well.

Looking back now, maybe I also just had a good background story. Free school meals, an immigrant at a young age, growing up lower class, and still managing to punch above my weight. There are plenty of well off kids and students who get into Oxbridge off the back of a well funded background that's been compounding them since they were young, and that's fine, but universities are also looking for raw talent in areas that may be underrepresented. So don't discount yourself simply because of your background. If anything, own it, and use it as proof of your grit, determination, and meritocratic strength.

UCAS grades aren't necessarily everything. Universities understand this to a certain extent, since some courses run interviews and entrance exams, giving you another opportunity to prove compatibility with the course even after a poor exam showing. Some people are late bloomers too. I knew a guy who achieved 3 A*s and got a place at Cambridge for Maths through the summer pool on results day, one day changed his entire life trajectory. Judging someone purely on their Year 12 performance isn't ever going to be 100% accurate for how they'll perform in Year 13. Always try to get the best grades, but if you don't perform your best, still go after your goals.

Personal circumstances, to a lesser extent. I never got any contextual grades, I was given A*A*A for Cambridge and A*AA for Imperial, fairly standard offers at the time. However, my personal statement and teacher reference expressed my circumstances of having less support at each application stage, having had free school meals. Cambridge allowed more space to write about your circumstances in their

application portal. This doesn't mean I got special treatment, since I still received the same offer as everyone else, but it does show them it's more remarkable for someone from my background to still achieve strong grades and apply. You have to believe in and fight for yourself, since only you know your full backstory, and it's your job to showcase it to everyone else.

Uni prestige matters less than you'd think. In my opinion, based on what I've seen, the unis with the deepest concentration of ambitious, high performing people tend to be Oxbridge, Imperial, UCL and LSE, that's just been my experience. That doesn't mean capable, driven people aren't everywhere. I've met plenty of people at other universities outperforming Oxbridge and Imperial grads. It's concentration, not exclusivity. So if you don't end up at your first choice, keep your head up. It really is what you make of it.

> **Key takeaway:** Getting an offer from a top university is a combination of giving yourself a genuine chance, using every resource your school offers, being likeable and teachable in interview, and knowing your grades alone won't define the outcome. Don't self-reject before the university has even had the chance to.

Chapter 11: Should You Take a Gap Year?

I never took a gap year, since I come from an Asian household, and so the idea of taking a year to be idle was never going to be an option. However, some people argue it's a good way to give yourself a break after A-levels, before uni, and that you'll come in more organised, more prepared and more focused on what you actually want to achieve and get out of uni. I don't necessarily disagree. For me personally, a couple of months of summer break was sufficient, and the idea of a gap year felt too long. But I do know friends who took one and performed fine.

Generally you can't really tell the difference between a gap year student and a non gap year student, and I guess it works both ways. A year can be a long time, and it can also be a short time. One year difference isn't a major sacrifice when thinking long term, so my opinion is objectively neutral. If you genuinely believe you need a gap year, consider it. For me, and for most people I know, that just isn't an option. But if I was in a different position where I could use a gap year to travel, work jobs, learn more independence, and try out different activities, look at what people do on social media for inspiration, some people take a gap year to do loads of side quests, and some pretty productive, noteworthy ones at that, working in places like Apple, for example.

My advice, at minimum, is to keep yourself busy or doing something productive. Use the gap year to stack up money, learn a skill, change something about yourself, or identify what you actually want to get out of uni. If you're on a gap year and reading this, well done, this is a good document to read for a clearer picture of uni and what to do and not to do for ultimate success and maximisation. Conversely, if you're a regular student reading this on your summer break, well done as well, for my brain and for me, a three month summer break is more than enough time compared to a gap year, though I know plenty of people who took gap years and say you come into uni more mature and more driven by what you want to get out of it.

I'd only recommend a gap year if you genuinely need one for your mental health, and you're going to use the year productively with a clear action plan. Easier said than done, of course, but with AI now, it's the easiest time to get ahead during a gap year, provided your parents are fine with it.

> **Key takeaway:** A gap year is neither inherently good nor bad, it's entirely dependent on whether you have a genuine plan for it. If you take one, treat it as an active year of stacking skills, money or experience, not a passive year off. And if you go straight from sixth form without one, it's completely normal to feel a bit rushed in those first few weeks. I did too. But that feeling fades relatively quickly, and statistically you'll be absolutely fine and settle into uni life soon enough.

Chapter 12: 3-Year vs 4-Year Courses

I do a four year MEng course, and I'm quite glad of my decision. US degrees are four years anyway, and I get to leave uni with a masters degree. I don't think leaving with a bachelors versus a masters is really that important anymore for employment, but it sounds cooler to say I have a masters in engineering. I don't feel like I'm being dragged along by doing a four year course, though it's not the same for everyone. I know plenty of people who chose to leave after three years instead, as their goals readjusted away from their degree, and plenty who do three year bachelors courses from the start.

For me, having that one extra year after my bachelors as an integrated masters means I don't have to pay extortionate external masters fees, and the extra year gives the perfect amount of time to maximise uni. Some perks of doing a four year course: more time for applications. I did a spring week and a summer internship both in my second year, since I wasn't fully decided on my graduation date yet. You get more freedom and flexibility during your first and second year for things like spring weeks and internships, since you have the option to shift your graduation date.

Of course, one could argue you could be seriously locked in and achieve everything perfectly within three years, but frankly, when I first entered uni in October 2023, I didn't even know what spring weeks were until a month later, by which point most early applications had already closed, so my chances were minuscule. It was also my first time writing a professional CV and listing experiences. I managed to fill my first year summer with rudimentary experience, work experience through organisations like SEO London, and I also tried my hand at starting an SMMA with a friend. It didn't really go anywhere, but it gave me the opportunity to try things out and gave me an extra year to land more experience in second year, where I got a spring week and a summer consulting role.

I've now just finished my third year and will be doing two internships this summer. I don't understand people who want to rush graduation. I want to appreciate my time at uni as much as possible and make the most of it, recognising the golden opportunity it is, where you're an adult but still a student, so people give you the benefit of the doubt and are more inclined to help you. Trying out new things is expected and encouraged of you. All of this diminishes severely once you leave uni and become a proverbial "grown adult," where doing everything you want in life is entirely your own business and there's no safety net.

I know I've slandered external masters students earlier for spending tens of thousands of pounds to delay graduation and buy themselves time to think, but an integrated masters is different. The fourth year costs the same as a regular bachelors year, so it's cheaper, and you don't have to pay it out of your own pocket, since you can still apply for student finance. Actively knowing you're doing four years from the beginning is also better than haphazardly applying to a new masters somewhere new with no real clue what's going on in your life now that you've finished your bachelors.

> **Key takeaway:** A four year integrated masters gives you more runway to figure out spring weeks, internships and your own direction without the pressure of external masters fees later. If your course offers this route and you're not in a rush to start working, it's usually the better financial and strategic option over a standalone external masters.

Chapter 13: From the Community, What Imperial Students Actually Say

Everything in this manifesto so far is my own experience, filtered through my own biases, my own course, my own path. To make this more legitimate and give you a wider picture than one person can offer, I put together a survey and had current and recent Imperial students, across nearly 40 different courses, answer questions about their applications, their course, and their time here so far. Below is what the data actually shows, along with a curated selection of the most detailed, useful, and honest responses. Names are left out, courses are included where relevant.

The patterns, across roughly 56 responses

A-level subject combinations, by frequency:

- Maths: 86%
- Physics: 61%
- Chemistry: 48%
- Further Maths: 48%
- Biology: 25%
- Economics: 14%
- Computer Science: 14%
- History: 5%

Maths is close to universal, and roughly half took Further Maths specifically, which lines up with what I said earlier in this manifesto about it being genuinely worth taking if you can.

Extracurriculars focused on before applying, by frequency:

- Work Experience/Internships: 29 mentions
- STEM Competitions/Olympiads: 25 mentions
- Volunteering: 24 mentions
- Academic Research Projects: 24 mentions
- Sports Team Participation: 20 mentions
- Music or Arts: 8 mentions

Overall experience rating (out of 5): the overwhelming majority rated their time at Imperial a 4 or 5 (47 out of 56 respondents), with only a single 1-star rating and 8 giving a 3. That's a genuinely strong signal for a survey that explicitly asked people to be "perfectly honest."

On interviews: real prep processes

- One Chemistry student did a mock interview with their school teacher, covering AS content and their personal statement in depth, and noted: *"Chemistry interviews mostly focus on what you wrote in your personal statement, and anything you mention, no matter how insignificant, might be assessed."*
- One Materials student did a group task (a "balloon debate" for the best material) followed by a 1:1, and put the real skill plainly: *"It's about striking a balance of knowing your shit but not being*

cocky about it. You have to be confident about what you know is true, but also be teachable. If you try to cheat the system, someone will catch on you're being dumb about it."

- One Mechanical Engineering student used two older siblings who'd already gone through Imperial admissions to source likely interview questions from current students on the same course, a genuinely underused tactic if you have any older connections at all.

What nobody tells you before you arrive

- *"Getting in is the easy part, at least that's how it feels for the first two years."*
- *"The step up from A-Level is way bigger than expected. Imperial can humble you very quickly."*
- *"There are less girls than you expect."*
- *"The lecturers are lecturers, not all of them are good teachers."*
- *"The workload is ridiculous and over the top, not even Oxbridge students get this much work."* (worth reading alongside the other, more measured responses here, since experiences clearly vary by course)

On mindset shifts and proudest achievements

A genuinely recurring theme, independent of course, was realising the degree itself is only part of the value. One Mechanical Engineering student's response captures it well: *"I've learnt that it's very easy to get caught up in cycles of 'hype' where it seems necessary to be constantly building something. I've learnt to try a lot of different things, overcommit and overdeliver, then strip back from there, otherwise you'll never know your limits."*

One Chemistry student was honest about nearly dropping out in first year, before turning it around: *"I really disliked Terms 1 and 2 during my first year. I was seriously considering dropping out. I then quickly realised I chose this degree and university for a reason, and decided to lock in. My latest set of results have been my best set yet."*

A moment of honest balance: the one 1-star response

Not every response was glowing, and it's worth including the one genuinely low rating for balance. A Physics student who rated their experience a 1 explained: *"Personal struggles made it unreasonable to enjoy first year."* Even they, however, offered a genuinely useful practical tip: *"Don't waste money on food on campus, learn meal prepping, you will save so so much."* Struggling with first year doesn't mean someone has nothing useful to offer, and it's a reminder that not everyone's experience is uniformly positive, something worth keeping in mind if your own first year is difficult too.

A collection of the best niche, specific advice

- *"Utilise the Outlook calendar to timeblock everything. Sixth form and secondary wasn't like that, but now you can see how it fits with your schedule and where your free time actually is."*
- *"Don't compare yourself to other students in your course."*
- *"Get close with your tutorial lead and push for opportunities from them or someone they know."*
- *"Only feel stupid for asking questions without doing your due diligence. If you've done the right amount of research, ask away."*
- *"No matter how far behind you feel, you can always pull it back."*

- *"Message Imperial students, be shameless with cold approaching, at the end of the day the worst thing they can say is no."*
- *"Go out of your way to talk to people you don't know on campus, the ROI is insane."*
- *"Doesn't matter what you do or where you are, your network is one of your strongest assets."*
- *"Never claim you hate a part of your course, especially if it's new, you only hate it because you haven't given it enough time to process and appreciate what's going on, at least 90% of the time. And exercise, if you're struggling to study and feel demotivated, the gym can be a great antidote to that frustration."*

> **Key takeaway:** The patterns here largely confirm what's already in this manifesto, Maths and Physics dominate, work experience and Olympiads matter, specificity beats generic achievement in personal statements. But the honest range of individual voices, including the one genuinely difficult first year, is worth sitting with. Nearly everyone found their own version of what worked, and nearly everyone, even the ones who struggled, found something worth passing on.

Chapter 14: Wellbeing Support Exists, Even Before You Arrive

If you're currently applying, or waiting on offers, it's worth knowing something most people don't find out until they're already struggling: universities like Imperial have genuine, funded wellbeing and mental health support built in, and it's there from day one, not something you have to earn or prove you deserve.

Most departments have dedicated wellbeing and pastoral staff, separate from your academic tutors, and a proper counselling service alongside them. Some even have therapy dogs or similar you can just go and spend time with to lower stress. This isn't just for crisis moments either, financial stress, feeling overwhelmed, or simply not knowing where to start are all completely valid reasons to reach out once you're there.

I can speak to this personally. In my own first year, I was navigating genuine financial hardship, no student finance due to a visa issue, essentially broke. My department didn't just point me toward a generic web page, they helped me all the way through to securing a scholarship and extra funding. That kind of support is quite literally part of what your tuition already pays for.

A few things worth knowing now, before you've even accepted an offer:

- These services are free and built into your place at university, not an optional extra you pay more for
- You don't need to be in crisis to use them, financial stress or general overwhelm both count
- Every department has someone whose actual job is pastoral support, separate from your personal tutor
- Reaching out early, before things spiral, consistently produces far better outcomes than waiting until you're at breaking point

> **Key takeaway:** One of the quiet advantages of choosing a well-funded university like Imperial is that genuine support exists here, and it's there whether you use it or not. If you're anxious about coping once you arrive, know that the infrastructure to help you cope is already built into the place you're applying to.

Chapter 15: Prepping for Uni Before You Start

There's a genuinely useful window between getting your results and starting your course that most people waste entirely. Here's what I'd actually do with it.

Brush up on your relevant A-level topics

Don't do a deep dive, most of it won't be directly applicable anyway. But stay familiar with the key concepts so you're not completely lost in your first week. It's a small thing, but it makes the transition noticeably smoother, and having solid foundational A-level knowledge genuinely matters for rigorous courses.

Bear in mind first year is usually designed to bring everyone up to the same level, since students arrive having done different A-level combinations. Some people will need teaching up to standard, others will find the early content fairly easy in comparison.

Start thinking about careers now, not in second year

Think about what career, careers or general paths you're interested in, and start early. It's completely fine to have multiple interests you can't yet choose between. Do insight days, learn more about them, and plan accordingly, because things like spring weeks have genuinely early deadlines.

I started first year in October, which is exactly when spring week applications open, and I had literally no idea until it was already too late. That's precisely how important pre-planning before university actually is.

Ask people in the years above

Genuinely useful for getting a better picture of the lay of the land, specific tips, course advice, and what actually matters versus what doesn't. Older students are generally very willing to help you out with the work they did when they were in your position, since they remember being there.

Meet a few people before you start, without overdoing it

Speaking to some people before term starts is a small but useful thing. Don't overdo it though, you don't want to cause drama or pretend to be someone you're not in the freshers WhatsApp group chats.

Realistically, texting people, then meeting them, then getting past the initial freshers stage are all natural filters, most of the people you meet early won't end up being your closest friends. But it still gets you involved in things and teaches you to be more social and forthcoming with new people, which matters, since having a good network gives you access to better events and more interesting people.

Look at societies before you arrive

Check out which societies you'd genuinely want to join, and think about what you actually want to get out of them. If you want to develop a specific skill or get better at something, go in with that intention, that's genuinely proactive thinking, and it applies equally to careers, sport, and personal interests.

> **Key takeaway:** The gap before university is one of the few genuinely free windows you'll get, and the students who arrive already knowing what spring weeks are, what societies they want, and what direction they're vaguely aiming in start compounding months ahead of everyone else.

@khuselee_

Part 2: Money Before You Arrive

Chapter 16: Scholarships, Bursaries & Funding, How to Actually Get Them

There's genuinely free money on the table at a university like Imperial, non-taxable too, and a lot of students simply never claim it, either because they don't know it exists, or they assume it's not for them. Here's a breakdown of what's actually available and how it works.

The Imperial Bursary

This one is automatic. It's means tested based on your household income the moment you register with Student Finance England, so there's no separate application, no extra form, and it's genuinely generous. If your household income qualifies, this is literally free money Imperial gives you, with zero extra effort required beyond registering with SFE properly in the first place.

Scholarships

Imperial students who aren't especially well off, which, contrary to what it can feel like on campus, is actually the majority, may be awarded scholarships alongside their bursary.

- Some scholarships get added automatically once you're eligible, sometimes you'll simply be awarded one without having applied for it specifically
- Others require you to actively apply or register your interest, which, given it's free money, is a genuinely small ask for the potential payoff
- **Timing matters a lot here.** Most scholarship applications and selections close before you even start uni, often while you're still in Year 13 applying to Imperial in the first place. If you're reading this and you're not at uni yet, get on this immediately, since most of these windows close earlier than people expect

If you don't have a scholarship but genuinely need more support

Speak to your department directly. If you have an actual case, free school meals growing up, low household income, a noticeable financial burden, they will generally try to help you in some way. This might mean:

- Being awarded a scholarship, simply by asking, like I was
- Being given a temporary grant to cover a specific hardship
- Being given equipment you need, I was given a laptop in first year this way, since I didn't own one

Universities want you to succeed, and financial stress getting in the way of that is exactly the kind of problem they have funding set aside to solve, you just have to be the one who brings it to their attention.

The Society Experience Fund

If your household income is eligible, Imperial also runs a society experience fund, cash you can use specifically for society memberships or session costs. It's a genuinely nice pot of money that most students don't even know exists, worth checking if you're eligible before assuming society costs are a fixed, unavoidable expense.

Facilities & Practical Resources

Beyond direct funding, there are a few other practical resources worth actively using:

- **Student discounts everywhere.** Railcards, software, retail, subscriptions, always check before paying full price, it adds up more than people expect
- **Imperial's Hackspace and Robotics Society.** Learning to make hardware yourself can be genuinely expensive if you're buying your own equipment, doing it through a university society or dedicated space lets you test out that interest at a fraction of the cost
- **Invest in a laptop that'll genuinely last you.** I bought myself a MacBook Pro specifically so I wouldn't be limited by my own tech for years to come, having grown up relying on borrowed, underpowered equipment. If you can afford it, a good laptop built to last 5-10 years is worth the upfront cost
- **An iPad, or equivalent, for note-taking.** Far easier to carry around than a stack of binders, genuinely good to write and draw on directly, and particularly well suited to STEM degrees where diagrams, equations and annotated figures come up constantly. It's not just my opinion either, Chemistry and Medicine at Imperial actually give their students iPads as standard, which tells you something about how useful they've found them to be for this kind of work
- **A genuinely good network of friends who push you.** Whether that's on grades, business, or internships, the people around you shape your own trajectory more than most people give credit for
- **Get a mentor.** Someone further along than you, in whatever direction you're headed, is one of the most underrated resources available to you as a student, more on this later in the manifesto

> **Key takeaway:** Almost none of this funding comes to you automatically beyond the base bursary. The scholarships, grants, and equipment all require you to either apply on time or actively ask. The single biggest mistake students make here isn't failing to qualify, it's not knowing the money exists in the first place, or being too proud or unaware to ask for it.

Chapter 17: Budgeting as a London Student

London is expensive, and Imperial specifically sits in South Kensington, one of the priciest pockets of the city. Most of what actually gets you through as a student here isn't some clever hack, it's a handful of consistent, boring habits, repeated properly.

The basics that make the biggest difference:

- **Travelcards over pay-as-you-go.** If you're commuting regularly, a monthly travelcard works out considerably cheaper than tapping in and out with contactless every day, and it removes the mental friction of "spending money" every single trip, which paradoxically makes you more likely to actually go out and do things, rather than staying in to avoid the fare
- **Meal prep over eating out.** Batch cooking at home, simple things like oven fried chicken with rice and veg, costs a fraction of anything you'd buy around campus, and often tastes better too
- **Meal deals as a fallback.** On days you haven't prepped, a supermarket meal deal is a far cheaper, still reasonably solid option compared to campus food outlets or South Kensington cafes
- **Student discounts, everywhere.** Railcards, software discounts, subscription discounts, retail discounts, always check before paying full price as a student, it adds up more than people expect
- **Track your spending, without obsessing.** Check your bank statement every so often. You'll usually spot a few unnecessary costs you didn't notice building up, subscriptions you forgot about, small daily purchases that add up fast
- **Build an emergency fund.** Work out your monthly costs and aim to have around three months' worth saved as a buffer, so one unexpected expense doesn't derail everything

On living situation and its impact on budgeting

Your biggest single cost as a student is almost always accommodation. Living at home, if that's an option for you, removes rent and most food costs entirely, and is genuinely one of the biggest financial advantages available to a London based student, even if it comes with its own social tradeoffs, covered earlier in this manifesto. If you are living independently, budgeting rent, bills and food properly from day one matters far more than any other individual saving tip on this list combined.

> **Key takeaway:** None of this is complicated. It's travelcards, meal prep, discounts, and actually looking at your bank statement occasionally. The students who struggle most financially aren't usually the ones with less money coming in, they're the ones who never built the habit of tracking where it's going.

A Final Word

That's everything I've got on actually getting in. If this was useful, the next guide in this series, Navigating Uni Life, picks up exactly where this one leaves off: what first year is actually like, how to avoid the mistakes I made, and how to build a genuinely good university experience from day one.

Kind regards,

Khuselee