Getting in
The big picture

You’ve just opened the front door of the University’s Wills Memorial Building and you’re looking at the entrance hall, which is a hive of activity as students gather for their final-year exams. Many of our alumni readers – who span more than seven decades – will recognise this scene.

It’s never been easy to gain entry to the country’s elite institutions, and Bristol is no exception. But today, only a very small percentage of those who want to study at Bristol as undergraduate students manage to do so. Bristol is the most popular full service university in the UK, when counting applications per place. This issue of Nonesuch takes a 360-degree view of undergraduate admissions at Bristol through the sharing of stories from applicants, parents, academics and the University’s policy-makers.
Welcome

Our alumni have every right to be proud of Bristol. It's, by a country mile, one of the most popular universities in the UK. Clearly, a Bristol degree is much sought-after.

But with popularity comes a challenge. This year, over 40,000 bright, capable, articulate students — most with three or more As at A-level predicted or in hand — applied for 3,600 Bristol undergraduate places. For some courses, we received more than 30 applications per place. It’s imperative, therefore, that we select from among these gifted applicants those students who are best able to make the most of their time at Bristol. This, sadly, means turning away tens of thousands of talented young people.

Part of what makes the University of Bristol experience unique is the calibre and vast potential of the student body, and there is compelling evidence that a more diverse peer group leads to a better university education. So again, the way in which we select our students is vitally important. I would like to reinforce at this point something our Head of Undergraduate Recruitment and Admissions refers to in her piece on page 12, which is that every single Bristol application is treated individually and with great care. These are important decisions and they’re not taken lightly.

Because these decisions are so important, we felt it appropriate to dedicate many pages of this issue of Nonesuch to personal stories and facts surrounding the subject of ‘getting in’ to Bristol. We’re keenly aware that Bristol’s highly competitive point of entry is a source of pride for many alumni. We’re also aware that it can be an emotive issue, particularly for those whose children or other family and friends are thinking about applying to university.

Also in this issue, alumni have described ‘how to get into’ other elite institutions. There’s an extraordinary level of competition to start a career in the Foreign Office, to join a club like Leander, or to become a Master of Wine. As is the case at Bristol, these and other similar organisations are highly selective. Arguably, that is part of their appeal.

My personal hope is that any student who is bright and talented enough even to consider applying to Bristol feels proud of that fact alone. The act of trying to get in is often a great achievement in itself.

Professor Eric Thomas (Hon LLD 2004)
Vice-Chancellor

40,000 applications
3,600 places
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News

We took the 30 most popular Bristol news items over the past three months and created this word cloud. The more often the word appeared in the stories, the bigger it appears in the cloud.

We describe a few of the top stories here. To read all 30, as well as the rest of Bristol’s news, visit www.bristol.ac.uk/news.

Newborn
First newborn receives xenon gas in bid to prevent brain injury
9 April 2010
In a world first, xenon gas has been successfully delivered to a newborn baby in a bid to prevent brain injury following a lack of oxygen at birth. This pioneering technique was developed by the University’s Professor Marianne Thoresen and carried out at St Michael’s Hospital, part of University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust.

Caffeine
Coffee consumption unrelated to alertness
2 June 2010
The stimulatory effects of caffeine may be nothing more than an illusion, according to new research that shows there is no real benefit to be gained from the habitual morning cup of coffee.

Cells
Stem cells from surgery leftovers could repair damaged hearts
26 April 2010
Scientists have for the first time succeeded in extracting vital stem cells from sections of vein removed for heart bypass surgery. Researchers found that these stem cells can stimulate new blood vessels to grow, which could potentially help repair damaged heart muscle after a heart attack.
**Neanderthals**

*Genetics confirm Bristol theory on Neanderthals*

6 May 2010

The publication of the Neanderthal genome sequence this week in *Science* confirms the theory that there was gene flow from Neanderthals to Modern Humans, a proposal previously made by Professor João Zilhão of Bristol’s Department of Archaeology and Anthropology.

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**Gregory**

*Professor Richard Langton Gregory, 1923-2010*

24 May 2010

World-renowned psychologist Richard Gregory CBE, DSc, FRSE, FRS and Emeritus Professor of Neuropsychology at the University, died peacefully on 17 May 2010. Professor Gregory was a leading figure in the scientific study of visual perception.

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**Iceland’s**

*Iceland’s volcanic ash plume: Bristol’s volcanologists provide expert comment*

19 April 2010

Dr Matthew Watson, Dr Jeremy Phillips and Professor Steve Sparks from the Department of Earth Sciences provided expert comment to the world’s media on the volcanic ash plume.

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**Broadcast**

*University hosts live BBC Breakfast television broadcast*

22 April 2010

The University hosted a visit from BBC Breakfast television for a live broadcast from the Wills Memorial Building as part of the build-up to the political leaders’ debate that took place in Bristol.

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**Students**

*Students reveal true identity of Elizabethan portrait*

18 March 2010

The subject of a sixteenth-century portrait of a young man that belongs to the National Portrait Gallery has been identified as Sir Robert Dudley, the illegitimate son of Queen Elizabeth I’s favourite courtier, the Earl of Leicester, by students at the University.

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**Corals**

*Baby corals dance their way home*

14 May 2010

Baby corals find their way home in their first days as free-swimming larvae by listening to the noise of animals on the reef and actively swimming towards it, an international team of researchers working in the Caribbean has discovered.

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**Flood-it**

*Flood-It: a game worth a million dollars*

9 April 2010

Flood-It is a computer game played by millions the world over. Dr Raphaël Clifford and colleagues from the University have analysed this popular game and for the first time shown it to be ‘NP-hard’, which means that anyone finding a simple solution to Flood-It could become a millionaire.

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**MS**

*MS researcher wins national award*

23 April 2010

A Bristol researcher has won the MS Society’s ‘MS Researcher of the Year’ award for his pioneering work to support the lives of people with multiple sclerosis (MS).
As Nonesuch is our alumni magazine, I will presume that most readers of this piece passed the hurdle of getting in to Bristol themselves. So we all know that the experience of applying to university is an emotionally charged one and that getting the admissions process right is important.

In my position as Bristol’s Chairman of Convocation from 1999 to 2009, I encountered dozens of alumni and others who found themselves caught up in the issue personally through their children’s desire to attend Bristol. And I met many others who felt strongly about the subject on purely ideological grounds. Clearly, many alumni care passionately about Bristol and want it to get this important issue right.

I’ve tried to include a fair sampling here of the themes which recur. Some are from letters which I and the alumni office have received; others are from conversations I’ve had over the years.

‘I am dismayed by some of Bristol’s admissions policies, and fear you are replacing one form of unfairness with another. Selection seems now to be based on political correctness rather than genuine academic criteria.’

‘My niece is extraordinary. She ticks every box: the right grades in the right subjects, a passion for the course she wants to get on to, a great reference from her teacher. How on earth could Bristol reject her?’

‘The comprehensive school system is a disaster and there must be many students who have done far worse in their A-levels than their innate abilities would warrant. So I understand and encourage the desire to enable them to get the university education they deserve. But any system which denies better-qualified candidates (both in terms of A-level grades and of general character) is invidious. Such social engineering always fails.’

‘My son’s school says that 20 of their top students applied to Bristol last year, but only two got in. There must be some prejudice against the school.’

‘I appreciate that the current A-level system doesn’t provide you with an adequate measure of academic potential. Can’t you interview everyone who meets your grade expectations, introduce your own entrance exams, or even expand the number of places?’

‘Why didn’t my grandson receive a proper explanation from Bristol about why he was rejected?’

‘Bristol was my second choice after Oxford all those years ago, though I loved it. Now my daughter is being told that even with three predicted As at A-level she probably won’t get in to Bristol. In the US, children of alumni are reserved a proportion of places – it’s a real shame that UK universities can’t consider the same thing.’

The voice of alumni

Dr Stuart Goldsmith (BA 1966, Hon LLD 2007), former Chairman of Convocation, reflects on his experience of how alumni perceive Bristol admissions.
It’s clear that all alumni have a shared desire to keep Bristol an outstanding university. So it’s not surprising that admission to Bristol is such an emotive subject. Indeed, in all my years volunteering on behalf of Bristol alumni, I’ve never come across a more divisive, far-reaching issue than this. I’m very glad that this issue of Nonesuch is setting out the University’s position clearly and thoroughly.

Do I think Bristol has got it right now? I’m sure the University is more transparent than it was a decade ago, which is great. Perhaps all the press attention in 2003, however stressful, has had some positive outcome. And I’m convinced that the weight of applications presents an enormous challenge. Going forward, I’d love to see A-levels reformed so there’s more distinction between top candidates. And I personally think that Bristol needs to continue refining and fine-tuning its admissions policies, as all great universities must.
A family affair

Two families talk to Rosie Dow (BA 2004) about the highs and lows of applying to Bristol.

The Punters

Jonathan (father) applied to study maths in 1975 and received an unconditional offer. He took up the place and received his BSc in 1978.

My own application to Bristol was completely non-stressful. I knew that if you put Bristol lower than second choice in your application that you wouldn’t get in, but that was fairly transparent and therefore I just marked Bristol as my first choice – and got in.

But my three daughters’ experiences were very different: the first two were both unsuccessful. The third now has an offer of three As to read history. I’m a logical mathematician, and I struggle to understand the logic in the UK admissions system today. The US universities seem a lot more open and applicants there seem to know where they stand. Many of our daughters’ peers have opted to go to university in the US. I might have encouraged my daughters to take the SATs had I known how difficult it would be to win a UK place now.

I received a great education at Bristol, which helped my career enormously. And, of course, I met my wife there too. So Bristol is very important to me. As an alumnus, I want Bristol to thrive and remain a top-class institution. The question of getting in is always going to be emotive, especially for children of alumni. My real hope is that as more and more people go to university and it gets harder for talented students to secure a place, Bristol will keep working hard to make the application process as transparent and fair as possible.

Julie (mother) applied to study maths in 1975 and received a conditional offer of ABC. She took up the place and received her BSc in 1978.

Anyone who’s remotely bright goes to university nowadays. Back in the seventies, only two out of my group of five close friends went to university, and we were all equally academic. There were fewer places available, but far fewer people wanted to go so it was less competitive. In fact, I never worried about not getting into university, as the process was so straightforward.

My conditional offer from Bristol, ABC at A-level, was fairly high compared with those I had from other universities. In fact, my teachers encouraged me to accept offers from other universities because they felt a secure offer was better, and most universities were similar. But I was sure I wanted Bristol and was prepared to work for it, and wait.

Studying at Bristol was special for me and I would have loved all of our daughters to have had a similar experience.
Emma (eldest daughter) applied to study psychology in 2007. Her application was unsuccessful.

Bristol naturally appealed to me because of its great reputation and my parents’ attendance there. It would have been a real achievement to get into Bristol, but I didn’t have three As at A-level so I had a feeling I wouldn’t be successful. Of course, I was disappointed when I heard that I hadn’t got in, but very soon afterwards I learned I had a place at Durham. I was delighted because Durham had actually been my first choice.

I do wonder whether universities like Bristol take into account the combination of applicants’ A-level subjects. My sister Clare got two As and two Bs at A level – it’s not three As, but she took four particularly hard subjects (maths, further maths, geography and chemistry). It’s impossible to know how universities compare that result with, say, three As, or four As in easier subjects.

Durham has been fantastic for me and I’m so glad that I chose it; the environment has suited me perfectly and is a refreshing change from London. I got my final results yesterday and achieved a 2:1 so I’m very happy. My future plans aren’t yet fixed but I’m considering further study in health or occupational psychology in London.

Clare (middle daughter) applied to study geography in 2010. Her application was unsuccessful.

I always thought I would follow in my parents’ footsteps, studying maths at Bristol. But by the time I got to thinking about university applications, I realised I was more interested in geography than maths. Bristol was still my first choice, and I did everything I could to help my chances of getting in, including taking four A-levels as recommended by my school.

The fourth A-level made for an extra ten hours of work each week, and I spent a disproportionate amount of time on chemistry. I eventually achieved AABB, but one of my Bs was only a few marks short of an A, and I was applying post-A-level. I thought I had a good chance. But my application wasn’t successful.

I was extremely upset, as Bristol had been such a favourite for me. Looking back at the process, a few things stand out. I will always wonder whether two Bs was worse than one A on my UCAS form. Maybe my school was wrong to recommend that I do four A-levels? Also, I know Bristol doesn’t interview for geography, but a straight rejection without an interview somehow feels more disappointing. Further, a lot rests on the personal statement, which was a real challenge for me, since my aptitude lies in science rather than writing, and I’m dyslexic.

In the end, I did secure a place at Newcastle University, and I’m really looking forward to starting in September. In fact, in many ways I’m very lucky. I know at least eight people among my friends, all as bright as me, who didn’t get into any of the universities they applied for. It seems difficult to get a place at all. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d been in that situation; so many people go to universities these days that it seems the only option if you want a good job.
Sarah (youngest daughter) applied to study history in 2010 and received a conditional offer of AAA.

I had always loved Bristol and wanted to study there, but I figured Clare would be the one to get in if any of us did. When Emma didn’t get a place I was surprised, but when Clare also didn’t get in I was shocked. So I didn’t expect to succeed myself, especially as I wanted a deferred place.

I chose to apply for history because of a lifelong interest in the subject. In my personal statement I talked about how I believe the study of history informs our understanding of modern times, and also related my personal affection for the subject.

Like Clare, I’m doing four A-levels, but in my case it’s because I didn’t want to give up art. My school had told me – incorrectly – that Russell Group universities wouldn’t recognise art as a ‘real’ subject. If I’d known the truth, that art is recognised, I wouldn’t have taken maths (which has put an extra strain on my studies).

I really was surprised to get an offer from Bristol. It’s been a little tense at my school; some of my friends were so much more fixated on Bristol than I was, but they didn’t get places. That said, my offer is AAA, so the worry isn’t over yet. I’m sitting my last exams now, and I haven’t thought too much about going to Bristol, because it’s still uncertain. All I can do now is work hard and hope.

Julie

It’s very hard to be a parent! We had no idea how to help our daughters with their applications. You get so many mixed messages from teachers and other parents. The rumour mill is rife. You feel inadequate as a parent because you just can’t help; it’s out of your hands.

I really am in awe of what our daughters have been through, and how much it differs from our own experiences. Most of all I am proud of them all for what each has already achieved, in their own individual ways.
Kate (daughter) applied to study medicine in 2008. Her application was unsuccessful. She reapplied to study psychology in 2009 and was offered a place. She has just finished the first year of her BSc.

When I was 16, I was sure that I wanted to be a doctor. I’d done work experience in a few hospitals and really enjoyed it; every day was different. I studied biology, chemistry and maths at A-level and when I was predicted to get three As everything seemed to be on course for my applications. I’ve always been aware of Bristol being a good place to study, plus dad studied there, so it seemed a natural option.

I was devastated when I didn’t get in. I’d known medicine was a popular course, but it didn’t really occur to me that I would be unsuccessful. It would have been easier if I’d made it to interview stage and then been turned down, because at least I would have had something to pin it on. As it was, I was pretty clueless.

I decided just to complete my A-levels and see what happened. I worked in dad’s office for a while and enjoyed it, which made me think I might be better suited to the structure and routine of an office-based role. I thought again about my subject choices. I definitely wanted to do a pure science. My teachers introduced me to experimental psychology. It sounded good, so with my three As now in the bag I applied to Bristol. This time I was successful and I began my course last year.

I love it at Bristol. After being so certain about the future a couple of years ago, I’m now not sure what life has in store for me after university. A lot of my friends are the same and it’s a source of constant discussion and consideration. I haven’t ruled out picking up medicine again, but for the moment I’m enjoying not having a plan.

I was disappointed for her. It was a stressful time for her; she’s an achiever and I think it was the first knock she’d ever had. Her ‘life plan’ was suddenly not going in the way she’d hoped it would.

I wouldn’t say I was annoyed about Kate’s first rejection, but of course I was disappointed for her. It was a stressful time for her; she’s an achiever and I think it was the first knock she’d ever had. Her ‘life plan’ was suddenly not going in the way she’d hoped it would.

Of course, I’m happy now that Kate is settled at Bristol. When I took her to halls for the first time, I was struck by how many people like her there were – privately educated children of professionals. After what I’d read and heard on the rumour mill about Bristol’s bias against Kate’s demographic, I saw nothing of it.

Bristol has been a key part of my life; my best friend at Bristol was my best man. He also recommended me for a job at Egon Zehnder, where I’ve been very happy. I’ve always had a degree of faith that things will work out for the best. If you genuinely want to do something, you’ll do well at it, so I’m sure Kate is on the right path now, whatever the future holds.
Because each applicant is an individual, each application is reviewed holistically. It’s not simply a matter of comparing grades or achievements.
Admissions: your questions answered

How will my application be assessed? Is there a formula that determines who gets admitted? Is it easier to get a place at Bristol if you come from a state school? Bristol’s Head of Undergraduate Recruitment and Admissions, Roseanna Cross (BA 1999, MA 2001, PhD 2005) explains Bristol’s application process.
The challenge for Bristol is the sheer volume of applications to study here. This year we received approximately 40,000 applications (home and overseas). This was for around 3,200 home/EU undergraduate places – a number fixed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), with severe financial penalties if we exceed it – as well as an additional, more flexible target of around 400 overseas undergraduate places.

Nearly all of the 40,000 applicants are predicted to get, or already have in hand, at least three As at A-level (or equivalent qualifications). Even though they are all clearly bright, high-achieving individuals, numbers still dictate that the vast majority of Bristol applicants will be unsuccessful. This simple fact gives rise to myriad myths that ‘Bristol is prejudiced against ... [choose your demographic]’.

Our priority is to identify and select fairly those candidates who have the most potential to succeed and will engage with and contribute to the intellectual and cultural vitality of the University community.

So, what’s our approach?

We start by publishing our admissions policies online (www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/policies/admissions). This way, we ensure that applicants have access to clear information about the policy framework within which all our departments select students. We receive UCAS applications on a rolling basis throughout the autumn and spring terms, with most programmes having an application deadline of 15 January.

As applications are received, we forward them to the appropriate departmental admissions tutors. Each department considers applications according to individual criteria. These are informed by University policy and are published on the web in the form of a course Admissions Statement. At least two people must review each application, though in many departments more are involved, particularly with borderline cases.

Because each applicant is an individual, each application is reviewed holistically. It’s not simply a matter of comparing grades or achievements. No single aspect of any application alone leads to acceptance or rejection.

**Nearly all of the 40,000 applicants are predicted to get, or already have in hand, at least three As at A-level.**

The personal statement is enormously important. Bristol looks for suitability to the programme, what each student could contribute to the University, and whether a student’s personal interests are aligned with the department’s strengths. Evidence of academic and extracurricular achievement is more compelling than statements of interest or ‘passion’.

Teachers’ statements are helpful insofar as they tend to validate a strength or alleviate concerns raised in the rest of the application. Seldom does a teacher’s reference move an application to the ‘unsuccessful’ pile, but they can confirm places in the ‘acceptance’ pile.

We’re often asked why so few Bristol departments interview applicants, particularly in comparison to Oxford and Cambridge. Oxbridge, with only five or six applications per place rather than Bristol’s eleven or more (some of our programmes receive over 30 applications per place), works to a less compressed timescale than Bristol thanks to its early application deadline. At Bristol, the logistics of interviewing all candidates would make it practically impossible.

Perhaps more importantly, there’s insufficient academic evidence to justify interviewing. It’s recognised as subjective, and at Bristol we have concluded that for most subjects interviewing doesn’t give sufficient additional evidence. Exceptions are made in subjects such as drama and medicine, where communication skills are such an integral part of the profession.

Each department times its decision-making to ensure fair assessment of applications at whatever point the candidate applies in the rolling admissions calendar – certainly, there’s no truth behind various myths suggesting that applicants gain advantage by applying to Bristol early, late, or in the middle of the process. Many departments will respond immediately to the very best and least good applicants, saving middle-range applicants for consideration until all applications are in; others wait until every application has been received before taking any decision. We’re conscious of the stress associated with university admissions, so we do our best to keep candidates appraised of the status of their application.

We believe we have a fair, robust, holistic approach. How do we judge whether we’ve got it right? First, a range of external quality assurance agencies, including SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions), cite Bristol as a university with sound practices. Second, our drop-out rate is one of the lowest in the UK.
This tells us that we’re selecting students who benefit from, and fit in well with, our courses and the University environment. Perhaps most importantly, at the other end of the spectrum, our graduates are in demand across a wide range of careers.

However, we don’t rest on our laurels. Our policies and practice are constantly being fine-tuned. We’re currently reviewing the speed with which we respond to candidates, how to utilise modern technology in our communications, and how to provide more personalised feedback. We recently launched a feedback service for applicants which has already garnered great interest.

There are six questions which are commonly asked about Bristol admissions. Some are covered in the above notes, but for clarity, I thought I’d state them plainly here:

1. **Is there a formula that determines whether students are admitted or denied?**

No. Bristol uses a holistic assessment process – that is, we take into account all available information to make a decision about each applicant on an individual basis. We don’t operate a mechanistic process. Decisions on each applicant are always taken ‘in the round’ by at least two members of the admissions team.

2. **Do students from state schools get into Bristol on lower grades than students from independent schools?**

We do take educational context into consideration, but school type is explicitly excluded in the selection process and when making offers. We don’t discriminate either for or against applicants from particular educational backgrounds.

3. **Is it possible to use connections with important people to get into Bristol?**

Absolutely not. Applications are considered independently by at least two different members of a department’s selection team using the criteria specified in their admissions statement. All successful applications meet the same criteria.

4. **Do international students take places that could go to home students?**

Home applicants don’t compete with international applicants for places. HEFCE sets a limit on the number of funded home students that we may recruit annually. International students don’t attract any HEFCE funding, so these numbers are limited by capacity at departmental and residential levels. We have two separate targets – one for home students, and one for international students – so there are two separate competitions for places.

5. **How do I know that the process is fair?**

We publish our admissions principles on our website, which clearly explain the measures we take to ensure a fair, consistent and transparent admissions process. All applications are considered on an equal basis by at least two independent assessors. The competition for places, and the tens of thousands of well-qualified applicants who are unsuccessful, may lead to an illusion of bias when actually there is none.

6. **If an applicant is predicted to get the required entry grades, don’t they have the right to be offered a place at Bristol?**

The University aims to recruit those students who have the academic ability, motivation and potential to succeed at the University. Academic achievement is an important, but not the only, part of the assessment process. Due to competition for places, we’re unable to offer places to all those who meet or exceed our academic criteria. We pay close attention to the personal statement and reference, and the assessment criteria are published in each admissions statement.

There’s no great secret

The University of Bristol was one of the first in the UK to publish its admissions principles and procedures online.

You can read the admissions principles and procedures at [www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/policies/admissions.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/policies/admissions.html).

You can read the admissions statements for each department at [www.bristol.ac.uk/prospectus/undergraduate/2011/admissions-statements.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/prospectus/undergraduate/2011/admissions-statements.html).

Bristol also publishes advice for applicants in entry profiles for each of its programmes, available via the course search option on the UCAS website: [www.ucas.com/students/coursesearch](http://www.ucas.com/students/coursesearch).

Any more questions?

In October we’ll be holding an event for alumni who have family or friends who are applying to University. Admissions staff will be on hand to answer questions. See page 35 for more details.
Fact-finding

Bristol is unique nationally – and possibly internationally – in having a research cluster devoted to the subject of widening participation. Dr Tony Hoare, Senior Lecturer in Geography and Director of the Widening Participation Research Cluster, talks about his work.

Bristol’s widening participation research was featured heavily in the report by Sir Martin Harris on access to highly selective universities ‘What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities?’ published in May 2010. Read the full report at: www.offa.org.uk/publications.
Bright but socially disadvantaged youngsters are poorly represented in elite universities such as Bristol. The reasons are many and complex: they are less likely to stay on at school, to attain high grades, to choose the right subjects. This underachievement is fuelled by low aspirations, low self-esteem and an absence of good advice. What’s more, those who do get the qualifications often don’t apply to the elite universities.

There’s a limit to how much universities can do about this, but we can ensure that those young people with the potential to succeed, but who don’t currently choose to apply, are identified as early as possible. We can also use contextual data about educational disadvantage in the admission process. But – and this is where the research cluster comes in – this needs to be based on evidence. Our widening participation activities are governed by the fact that we want to admit the very best students from wherever we can, so we need to make sure we get it right.

**Our widening participation activities are governed by the fact that we want to admit the very best students from wherever we can, so we need to make sure we get it right.**

The bottom line is that we have to turn a large number of people down, so we’re looking for the absolute best. How do we find those people? Grades, although very important, provide only one way. We’re looking for other things as well, and that includes potential to succeed.

Our research has given us two key things: hard evidence on which to base our policy and practice; and milestones to monitor how we’re doing.

One of our biggest projects looked at the cohorts that arrived in 2002, 2003 and 2004. The results were clear: students from poor-performing schools did better than those from high-performing schools on exit, even though they entered with lower grades. So our admissions tutors have to consider educational context when assessing applications. We’ve announced this formally on our website.

Most schools – independent and state – have accepted the principle of ‘contexting’, but they want to make sure that we’re still treating each applicant as an individual and we’re completely with them on this. Contexting is part of a holistic assessment, not a mechanical policy or formula. We don’t use tariffs, quotas or modifiers. Our approach is more subtle and complex.

We’re extending our research into contexting, looking at other factors such as GCSEs. If a student went to a poor-performing school to do GCSEs and then a better school to do A-levels, does that have an impact and need to be considered?

We’ve also looked at the barriers that may stop people from applying. One project looked at post-qualification applications. As disadvantaged students lack the confidence to apply to elite universities, would they be more likely to apply when they have their grades in the bag? Another project investigated the impact of extra tests on applications.

The focus of our work is local – and that’s its strength. However, it does have wider resonances and is likely to have an impact on what other highly selective universities do. As competition for university places gets more intense, this issue will become more crucial. The tighter the squeeze on places, the harder it gets.

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* The most advantaged 20 per cent of the young population are now around seven times more likely than the most disadvantaged 40 per cent to attend the most selective institutions.

* Pupils from top independent schools make twice as many applications to the most selective universities as their equally well-qualified peers from the best comprehensive schools.
Putting policy into practice

Admissions tutors from around the University talk about selecting candidates for their undergraduate programmes.

Kelly Moule (BSc 1984, PhD 1988), Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Biochemistry and Faculty Admissions Officer for Medical and Veterinary Sciences

To be a good admissions tutor you have to see each applicant as an individual, not just a piece of paper.

You also need to want the best for Bristol. I’ve studied and worked at Bristol all my life and I’ve a deep interest in seeing the very best students recruited. I want to maintain the position of my department, my faculty and my university.

I find assessing the applicants incredibly interesting. I look at the pile of UCAS forms and wonder which ones we will be welcoming to Bristol in October. Most of the applicants are exceptional and vast numbers of them exceed the standard entry criteria. We want to see enthusiasm and drive for the subject, and we look for things like reading outside the A-level syllabus and attendance at summer schools or symposia. In addition, the Veterinary Science programme obviously looks for relevant work experience, such as work in a vet practice, on farms or in kennels. We’re also looking for well-rounded individuals. Activities like music, sport or volunteering indicate other qualities, such as good time management skills.

As an admissions tutor you want to ensure fairness. Tony’s data allows you to bring educational context into the equation. We know that some of the best students aren’t those that come with straight A grades at A-level.

Shelley Hales, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Classics and Ancient History and Faculty Admissions Officer for Arts

We don’t take assessing lightly. I won’t turn down an applicant without thinking about it properly. You need to be fair and consistent, but you also need to make some hard decisions.

We assess applications based on our departmental admissions statement. We look at each application holistically, taking into account grades, statements, references – and how they interact with one another.

What we want to see above all else is genuine interest in the subject. In the arts, the personal statement is really important as this is where people can express themselves and their ideas. I enjoy reading them – they’re like little life stories. Some people haven’t had the chance to study classics, but they can show commitment to the subject in other ways. For example, they might write with insight about Gladiator and how the film inspired them to study classics.

I think it can be hard for applicants to accept rejection. They’ve done everything we asked of them and still they get turned down. How do you explain that grades aren’t the winning posts? We sift through hundreds of applicants who exceed the minimum entry requirement. In English there are 23 applicants per place, many with AAAA at A-level. We can’t magically expand the amount of places we have.

Tony’s research gives tutors confidence. It’s academically rigorous and provides the facts. It shows that if we base our decisions purely on grades we miss some excellent candidates. It isn’t prescriptive, though. It’s something to consider along with everything else, all other things being equal.

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Assessing several hundreds of applications is a big workload and you have to be committed to doing it properly. Each UCAS form represents the next four years of an individual’s life, and you feel the weight of that responsibility. You have to make some hard decisions, especially when rejecting some very good students.

You also have a responsibility to the department and to Bristol. You need to admit only the best, brightest and most motivated students: they’re a joy to teach and in turn they will sustain the University’s reputation and standing after they graduate.

The University receives many good applications for each available place, but we want to find the absolute best. Consequently we end up rejecting some, even though they are predicted to achieve very good exam grades.

Assessing an application is about more than just the grades: in the personal statement I look for indicators of genuine interest in the degree subject, and other qualities too. For example grade 7 or 8 in a musical instrument shows a real commitment, and captaining a sports team can be evidence of interpersonal skills. Also, I want to see that people have done things off their own back, not just because a teacher has told them it will look good on their UCAS form.
Access all areas

A pioneering scheme is helping gifted students from local schools to aim higher

Every year over 200 of the brightest A-level students from schools in the Bristol area take part in the eight-week Access to Bristol scheme. It gives students who might not have considered higher education an insight into the University, student life and the subject they’re passionate about studying. Those who then apply and get offered a place at Bristol receive a bursary.
Siobhan Heeley  
(Geography 2008-)

I hadn’t really considered Bristol. Not because I didn’t like it or didn’t think it was a great university, I just didn’t think it was for me.

The scheme gave me a good idea of what university life was like and a feel for Bristol. The lectures were great, the academics were friendly, and being able to ask current student questions was really useful. The course helped me with the application process and writing my personal statement.

Now I’m in my second year studying geography and I know I made the right decision to come here. I love my course. My subject is quite broad and incorporates lots of different disciplines, which I’m hoping – along with having a degree from Bristol – will make me quite employable when I finish my studies.

Without taking part in Access to Bristol, I wouldn’t have considered coming here. It showed me what a brilliant university it is. I think it’s a great way of introducing people from low-performing schools to university, and helping them to see that they can do things that they thought might have been out of their reach.

I’d definitely encourage anyone worried about applying to Bristol, or university in general, to find a scheme like Access to Bristol. It really calms your nerves and means you arrive knowing what to expect.

To find out more about the  
Access to Bristol scheme and other similar initiatives at Bristol visit www.bristol.ac.uk/wideningparticipation.

Lesley Silvester (BA 1968) explains why she supports the Access to Bristol scheme.

I’ve always believed that if you want positive, sustainable change, you need to focus on education.

My sister and I were the first in our family to go to university. My degree at Bristol gave me opportunities and choices that wouldn’t have been available otherwise. It absolutely transformed my life.

I launched my career in business, moved to the US and became focused on moving forward. I didn’t stay connected with Bristol at all. Then a few years ago I felt the need to reconnect and support Bristol in some way. The US model of private philanthropy has influenced me. In the States, if people make it, they tend to give back to their communities, their universities, their schools.

When I heard about the Access to Bristol programme, I was immediately drawn to it. It spoke to my values, and widening the pool makes absolute sense to me if you want to attract the best applicants.

The debate about potential is a complicated one. It’s certainly not the case that kids who go to the best schools sail through life without any problems – that’s way too simplistic. However, it seems obvious to me that kids from low-performing schools who have achieved excellent grades against all the odds show real potential.

To support Access to Bristol, visit www.bristol.ac.uk/centenarycampaign.
Department of Physics, 1910. Phyllis M Borthwick (second row, third from left) was, in alphabetical order, the first student to be admitted to a BSc degree in the University.

Let us in! The opening of the University’s new chemical and physiological wing on 15 November 1910 by Lord Winterstoke and the Right Hon Lewis Fry. Two bedells and academics in mortar boards, a mace bearer, worthies in top hats, a cleric, policemen and soldiers complete the group.

The Special Collections of the University Library comprise a rich and diverse range of printed books and journals, archival resources and artefacts in support of the academic work of the University and the wider scholarly community. Some of the highlights can be viewed online at www.bristol.ac.uk/is/library/collections/specialcollections/archives/treasures. Alumni donations funded this digitisation project.
Anyone can leave a legacy.
Think about it.

This scholarship is a unique opportunity for me to learn experimental techniques at the cutting edge of materials research and to grow professionally. Maybe the only way I can ever show my appreciation is one day to help someone else in a similar way.

Lucian Pascut (PhD Physics 2006- )

Lucian’s PhD scholarship is funded by the H H Potter Endowment Fund, established in 2003 with a legacy from Doreen Potter in memory of her late husband Harold Potter (BSc 1919).

For further information, please contact:
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www.bristol.ac.uk/alumni/planned-giving
The problem first arose in the spring of 2002. We invited the then Minister for Higher Education, Margaret Hodge, for a face-to-face briefing about Bristol’s widening participation and fair access programmes. She duly visited. She liked our approach and publicly cited it as an example for other universities to follow. Some of the leading newspapers carried the story. ‘This is great coverage,’ we thought. But it would turn out to be a poisoned chalice. What we hadn’t reckoned on was the backlash.

Initially it was low key. Tentative headlines – ‘Is Bristol being fair?’ – began to appear. There was a polite English debate. But then journalists turned their attention to a series of strong candidates from independent schools who hadn’t been offered a place at Bristol. Of course, there was no shortage of such people – of the 1,500 applicants for the 47 places available in 2003 to study English at Bristol, 1,300 were expected to meet or exceed the University’s minimum requirement of two As and a B at A-level. Interestingly, the newspapers paid no attention to the many high-flying but unsuccessful applicants who were from state schools.

The controversy intensified when the media discovered that a few of the students who were offered a place at Bristol had slightly lower grades than some others who were not successful. The media acted as though it had found a smoking gun. The story entered its most hysterical phase in March 2003, when there was talk of the Girls’ School Association and the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference boycotting Bristol.

For three weeks this was the biggest media story in the UK, with the possible exception of the build-up to the Iraq war. It made the news in half a dozen other countries as well. When the tabloids are in full cry, it’s pretty daunting – like being under siege. A lot of people simply didn’t want to accept the fact that...
intense competition for places at Bristol to study certain subjects meant that many strong applicants from all backgrounds wouldn’t receive an offer. We found ourselves accused of a plot against middle England, when what we were actually doing was bending over backwards to be scrupulously fair to everyone. Some commentators put forward the perfectly good argument that all universities should make sure their admissions procedures were transparent and consistent. A few journalists and one or two politicians even came to Bristol’s defence. But others indulged their fantasies: Bristol was hell bent on re-engineering society, either because it was an agent of the Labour Party or was staffed by Trotskyists.

It was a strange business. For years Bristol had been accused of favouring independent schools. Now we found ourselves accused of favouring state schools. Some of the media shifted their view of Bristol through 180 degrees overnight – all without the University altering a single line of its policy. One or two journalists seemed to have no qualms about portraying us as biased both for and against particular types of applicant. All that seemed to matter was telling a story that would thrill and scare their readers.

It was a hugely pressured period. The reputation of the University was on the line. The Vice-Chancellor and the then Pro Vice-Chancellor took a lot of the heat and were massively supportive. Admissions tutors faced many questions from applicants, parents and head teachers. I was inundated with media demands for answers, statements, reactions, interviews, articles. Normal life – personal and professional – had to be suspended. One Saturday afternoon I tried to go to the cinema with my wife, but the mobile phone just didn’t stop ringing.

Why was this such a huge story? The whole subject of admissions to universities in general and Bristol in particular seemed to touch a raw nerve. We hadn’t appreciated that an endorsement from a minister would provoke its opposite from those of a different political or ideological persuasion in Westminster and the media. The issue is also a very personal one for a lot of people: it’s about their day-to-day lives, their hopes and dreams for their children.

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I would never have anticipated how intense, bitter and vindictive the attack would become. The darkest moments were when the media made it personal. One national newspaper picked on a particular academic who had played a key role in developing Bristol’s widening participation policy. They accused him of holding a working-class grudge – ‘Steel worker’s son with a positive zeal for discrimination’. It was depressing to see the lengths the tabloids would go to in demonising an individual whose behaviour had been above reproach.

We fought Bristol’s corner hard and later won an award for our handling of the media crisis, but if I’m honest I’m not sure we changed many minds. Rather, I think we discovered that people’s position on admissions policy is almost impossible to shift; it’s so deeply rooted in a wider set of beliefs.

It also proved to be incredibly hard to articulate our position through the media. The issues are quite subtle and complex, but some media outlets weren’t prepared to go beyond sensational sound bites. There would be 20 paragraphs attacking the University and we’d be allowed a one-sentence response at the end. We had to find other, more direct ways of communicating with applicants, parents, heads, politicians and so forth.

In many ways, the University emerged from all this relatively unscathed. Independent schools did not impose a boycott and subsequently declared themselves happy with the way we dealt with admissions. Bristol has remained one of the top choices for truly outstanding candidates, whatever their background. That’s not to say the issue didn’t continue to surface in one form or other; it did, weekly.

One positive result of the crisis was that it encouraged us to make Bristol’s admissions policy and procedures clearer, more transparent and freely available on the web. They have long been there for anyone to see and will stand up to any amount of honest scrutiny.

In August 2005, the Independent Schools Council released ‘the findings of the largest-ever survey of applications to universities by pupils from independent schools. The survey looked at applications to ten of the most popular courses at 30 leading universities…. It has found no discrimination by universities against independent sector applicants.’ This report only ever generated a few brief stories in the middle of the papers – in sharp contrast to earlier front-page headline stories of Bristol’s supposed bias against independent schools.
Journey of a lifetime

From a refugee camp school in Sudan to one of the top universities in the UK, Severio Sebit (MSc Economics, Finance and Accounting 2009-) tells the story of his incredible journey to get into Bristol.
I was born in southern Sudan, a year before the outbreak of civil war in the country. One of seven children, I’m the first in my family to attend university.

I had to leave school at the age of eight for two years when fighting intensified and it became too dangerous to study. Schools were targeted by rebel army recruiters and bombs were being dropped in the area, so my family and I went on the run. We tried to go back, but it was impossible.

I was 12 when we moved to a refugee camp in Uganda. I went to a school funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I was one of only three people in my year to get a first grade in my exams. As a result I was given a UNHCR scholarship to attend a local boarding school. Boarding school changed my life. In the refugee camp you could go without food for up to three days, now I knew I had food and would be safe.

I was one of only eight refugee students in the region to gain a place at the University of Makerere in Uganda. I studied Agricultural Economics, funded by the Windle Trust International. I was motivated by a desire to get out of poverty – getting a good education is the only way to do this – and to eventually help others who are in a similar situation to the one I was in. After graduating I worked for two years with the UN in Sudan. During this time the Windle Trust helped me explore my options for attending university abroad and MSc in Economics, Finance and Management at Bristol was a perfect match for my career aspirations.

I was so excited to be offered a place at Bristol. It was a long journey, with two interviews, two years of waiting and many ups and downs, and I almost couldn’t believe it when my application was accepted. Once I received the offer, I had one month to get ready, process my visa and say goodbye to my wife and four-week-old daughter.

There have been many challenges to studying abroad. Having to leave my family and friends behind, getting used to the cultural differences in the UK, living on a very tight budget and of course the weather!

Student life here has been so different from that in Africa. Here you have internet access whenever you want. I didn’t even have a PC until I came to the UK.

Being in the UK during the election was a very interesting experience. It showed how an advanced democracy works: how leaders are accountable to the electorate, how voters are thoroughly informed and how people in the media have freedom of speech.

One of the best experiences I’ve had was attending a Raising & Giving (RAG) event. This was an opportunity for me to make friends and meet the students who made this scholarship possible through their fundraising efforts.

I’ve had to sacrifice a lot to be here. But getting a Master’s at Bristol was the only way for me to break away from poverty and secure my future. I also pay for three of my siblings to attend school back home, so I need to guarantee their education too.

Once I graduate I’d like to work for the UN back in Sudan. I want to help rebuild the infrastructure, schools and roads, but in the long term I’d like to work in government. Foreign aid agencies do much of the rebuilding work in Sudan presently, but it’s important for me to be able to work at the policy formulation and implementation level where I can help sustain this infrastructure once foreign aid workers leave.

Fifteen years ago, when I was on the run in the bush, I wouldn’t have believed I could get to where I am now. Then, I didn’t even think I’d get to finish primary school. It’s made me appreciate that even if everything else is taken away from you, you can bounce back with education.

Knowing that so many students helped fund my scholarship makes me work harder, as that’s the only way I can repay their effort. I’d like to say a big thank you to those students and alumni who’ve made this possible and I hope that in the future I can help others, as others have helped me.

Severio Sebit was awarded the 2009/10 Dorothy Hodgkin Scholarship, a partnership between the University and the Windle Trust. Each year Bristol students raise money through RAG for the living expenses and accommodation of a scholar, which is match-funded by donations from alumni. The University waives the student’s tuition fees, and the Windle Trust pays travel expenses.

Danny Witter (BSc 1990) recently made a donation to ensure that one Hodgkin Scholar can be funded for the next academic year, and in August 29 2010 students are climbing Kilimanjaro to raise further funds for the programme. Find out more at www.ubu.org.uk/activities/rag.
How to get into the Foreign Office

Our insider: Susan le Jeune d’Allegeersheucque (née Miller) (BA 1985) Director, Human Resources, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

So you want to be a diplomat? To join as a policy entrant (our fast-stream equivalent), formal requirements are a 2:2 (any subject) and a British passport. You also need to have lived for at least two out of the previous ten years in the UK. Our security clearance process also means that you should have been relatively clean-living (but we don’t expect anyone to have been a saint).

What else helps? An interest in foreign affairs, a willingness to live and work in some tough places, and some ability in languages are all good. If the thought of walking into a room full of strangers and introducing yourself to them, perhaps in a foreign language, before launching into a conversation about the local political climate scares you, it’s probably not the career for you. Showing that you are curious and sensitive to other cultures can impress the recruitment panel. If you’re a lone wolf and don’t enjoy other people much, you are unlikely to be at the top of our list. Much of what we do involves getting along with others, or delivering through a team of people.

The recruitment process tests you against our core competences, which include things like managing and developing staff, communicating and influencing, and strategic awareness. Obviously, the more evidence you can provide of doing these things well, the better. But the process tests competence, not knowledge or experience (we don’t expect you to have a detailed knowledge on entry of international treaties like the Italian diplomatic service does).

How hard is it? Really hard. We attract huge numbers of applicants (as many as 8,000 for as few as 20 places) so the competition is intense. Lots of really good people don’t make it (although some don’t give up and get in on their second or third attempt, having done something useful in the meantime).

So why bother? Don’t bother if you want to earn lots of money, or a nine to five job. On the other hand, the FCO is a uniquely interesting and important place to work. I joined straight from Bristol in 1985. I’ve had a brilliant time. The work is always challenging, never boring. My career has taken me to Brussels, the Far East, Latin America and Washington. I can’t think of another job that would have given me or my family the same opportunities, excitement and enjoyment.

How to get into the Royal Society

Our insider: Michael Mailim FRS (BSc 1984), Professor of Infectious Diseases, King’s College London

Getting in usually requires unique and innovative contributions to science that have changed the way others think about certain issues and questions. Some senior scientific administrators also get in, and also folks from the media.

You have to be nominated by a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS). Then you are basically judged on your contributions, by a series of objective assessors and a Society panel. There is no general vote among the Fellowship, though I believe the final elections are ratified at the AGM. However, I’m hazy on these details as I haven’t yet served on a panel.

It’s competitive to get in. Theoretically the candidates are top scientists holding Commonwealth passports. However, there are plenty of outstanding
How to get into the House of Lords


The House of Lords has been described as the best club in London. It’s a marvellously diverse place, full of interesting people who have unrivalled knowledge about everything from the arts to outer space.

The entry routes make it sound like the ultimate secret society. There are special routes for bishops, for hereditary peers and, until recently, for very senior judges. The Prime Minister reserves a small number of personal appointments for people like the Head of the Civil Service or the Governor of the Bank of England when they retire. Apart from that there are two main routes: cross-bench peers and political peers.

Cross-bench peers have their own application process – if you are interested look at www.lords.appointments.independent.gov.uk. You can even nominate yourself, but high achievers only need apply. I was appointed as a Conservative political peer. I didn’t apply and I have only the haziest of ideas about how I actually got here. But it went something like this.

A rather long time ago I did a bit of work for the Conservative Party in my home constituency. My successful career as a chartered accountant in KPMG then evolved into advising government, culminating in a secondment as the Director of Finance for the NHS.

This featured the implementation of some radical Conservative reforms in which I played a central part. I was noticed. Paths began crossing – including some which led back to that early political activity. I was appointed to bodies such as the NHS Policy Board and the Court of the Bank of England. I was made a Dame.

People started saying something along the lines of ‘Have you ever thought of ...?’. And unexpectedly in 2000 I got a call from William Hague asking me if I’d like to be a working peer. (Answer: yes, please!)

Could I have planned all of that? Probably not. It was the usual combination of hard work and luck that you will find in the CVs of a lot of people who have made it in some way. But I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone who gets the chance.

The House of Lords has 707 members. The majority are life peers who are appointed by the Monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister. Membership was once a right of birth to hereditary peers, but following a series of reforms these now form only a small portion of the membership. Find out more at www.parliament.co.uk.

individuals who are worthy of consideration, but who have not been nominated for a variety of reasons. It’s often the case that institutions with a high density of FRSs continue to be successful – one tends to nominate a colleague down the corridor rather than some more distant individual. Of course, institutions rich in FRSs also tend to attract top academics.

Getting in is an incredible privilege, and not something I’d ever anticipated. The advantages? People seem to be impressed with me being an FRS – until they get to know me better.

My children chastise me for mistakes I make (‘But I thought you were an FRS ...’). I’ve met some amazing people that I wouldn’t have met otherwise (through attending lectures, meetings and so forth). There are real opportunities to get involved in science policy. You can also get a great view of Trooping the Colour from the terrace!

There are currently 1,300 FRSs. Each year, the Fellows elect 44 new Fellows and eight new Foreign Members. Find out more at www.royalsociety.org.

www.bristol.ac.uk/alumni
How to get into the Institute of Masters of Wine

Our insider: Edward Adams MW (BA 1981), co-founder, La Bascula Wines and Master of Wine

I became a Master of Wine (MW) back in 1991. In fact the hurdles to be jumped to acquire those two initials after your name are pretty much the same as they were in 1991. There is a theory and practical side to the exam, although a dissertation has replaced the old short essay. Subjects range from viticulture and vinification to marketing and social issues surrounding alcohol. There are three blind practical papers where you must judge and evaluate a wine closely. To become an MW you have to reach an absolute standard of 65% in the exam – this hasn’t changed as far as I know since the Institute was set up in 1953. About a quarter of the people who start off on the MW courses end up passing the exam.

Originally it was very much an all-British and all-male affair. Now more women pass than men; our chairman is an Austrian and his deputy is a South African woman. Over half of the successful MWs for the last few years have come from outside Britain. Also, till quite recently you had to be in the wine trade; now the Institute is open to all wine lovers from any field.

So, why bother? You train your palate to assess and evaluate a wine quickly; it certainly improves your tasting ability, and you learn to treat wine as an intellectual subject.

The MW is a highly respected qualification throughout the wine world. There are also career advantages: I might not have been recruited to work for the company that created the South African brand Kumala without it. Occasionally, it also opens the inner sanctum of producers’ cellars and some of their finer wines are uncorked, which definitely has to be a good thing.

There are currently 280 Masters of Wine around the world. Find out more at www.mastersofwine.org.

How to get into the Chelsea Flower Show

Our insider: Noni Bemrose (MA Garden History 2010), Plant Heritage Collections Coordinator, Somerset

To exhibit at the Chelsea Flower Show is considered a mark of horticultural excellence. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), the professional body that invites and chooses exhibitors, wants the very best, and the competition is fierce. It’s at Chelsea that many new varieties of plants are introduced and old varieties revived.

There are a bewildering number of categories at Chelsea, but perhaps the two most popular are the Show Gardens and the Floral Marquee. The former attracts designers from all over the world. The latter provides a showcase for some of the most striking plants.

The ambition of every exhibitor at Chelsea is a Gold Medal. Below that are Silver Gilt, Silver and Bronze. What every grower dreads is a letter informing them that their exhibition was below standard. This is bitterly disappointing, but doesn’t happen very often.

It takes dedication and years of hard work just to exhibit at Chelsea. Most exhibitors have a solid horticultural background, starting with an apprenticeship with a well-known nursery. An alternative is to complete one of the courses available at either Kew or Wisley. Virtually all the growers in the Floral Marquee have spent many years exhibiting at the county shows, where they will have won medals. The RHS are always present at these shows, and, rather like talent spotters, will approach outstanding growers and invite them to exhibit at Chelsea. It’s possible to apply to exhibit, but the chances of getting in without a successful track record are slim.

Whichever route you take, it’s a long and hard journey; but as every grower who has won a Gold Medal at Chelsea will tell you, it’s more than worth it.

Find out more at www.rhs.org.uk.
How to get into Mensa

Our insider: Ian Hudson (BSc 1971, Cert Ed 1972), Mensa member since 1976.

Mensa describes itself as ‘the high IQ society’. The name is not an acronym; it is a Latin pun, on the noun mensa (‘table’, a meeting place) and the motto mens sana in corpore sano, ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’, recognizing that highly intelligent people who never have the opportunity to mix with others of the same intellectual level can easily feel socially isolated – which isn’t healthy.

The only qualification for membership is a score in any (properly calibrated and marked) intelligence test that places you in the top two per cent of the population. To join, you can either supply suitable test results, or take Mensa’s invigilated test. There’s no competitive element; whether you pass depends entirely on your own score.

One of the main benefits of belonging is the opportunity to meet other members socially. You also get the kudos; membership is a shorthand for being exceptionally clever (even though many more could join than do).

Test tips? Well, if you get nervous taking tests, you could get some typical intelligence test questions and try them. If you get nowhere, you probably don’t have the high IQ needed, because no special knowledge is required, and no amount of studying can improve your score. Preparation is simple: get comfortable, and try to relax. Indeed, be fatalistic: you will either see through the questions or you won’t. As far as we know, you were born with whatever IQ you’ve got and there isn’t much you can do about it.

Mensa was founded in England in 1946 as a forum where bright people could meet socially.

Find out more at www.mensa.org.uk.

How to get into Leander

Our insider: Jezz Moore (BSc 1985), Leander member and one of several volunteer coaches supporting the full-time team.

The criteria for membership are ‘proficiency in good oarsmanship and good fellowship’, but to become a full member you must have rowed or coached either for the club itself, for Great Britain or at a recognised elite standard such as the boat race crews. You need to be the best of the best. We’ve had 99 Olympic gold medal winners; 15 oarsmen went to the Olympics last year and 13 came back with medals.

To become an associate member is a bit easier. It’s available to people who aren’t such good rowers but who share our ethos. You need to be forwarded and seconded by a member, but most of all you need to be an avid supporter of the club. We want active partners who genuinely want to help our rowers. If you live on the Outer Hebrides and you’ve never rowed before, then it’s unlikely that you’ll get in. If you live locally, get involved and support the functions, then you’ve more chance.

I was proposed for full membership in 1997. I was put forward because I’d coached at Leander, and had also coached the Junior GB squad in 1994 and several of those lads had found their way to Leander and were now representing GB at full International level.

The benefits of being a member? Apart from the facilities for corporate functions, it’s also nice to know that you’re part of one the most successful clubs in the world. There’s a lot of pride and passion at Leander.

It’s a real buzz to walk through the doors into the bar that’s full of with world champions, sit down and have a beer with them. My favourite bit is coaching; watching juniors develop and move on to the international squad.

Leander recently made it into the Telegraph’s list of Britain’s 15 most exclusive clubs. It has 3,500 members – men and women – worldwide, and its rowers have won more Olympic medals than any other sports club in the world.

Find out more at www.leander.co.uk.
How to get into TV

Our insider: Danny Robins (BA 1998), TV presenter, comedian, writer and journalist

Getting into TV is a bit like seducing a nun. It can take years, success is far from likely and even if you do finally crack it, it will leave you feeling hollow and full of self-loathing. But, if you really want to sign the Faustian pact that is a career in the media, here’s how to do it.

You’ll write endless letters to a stream of ‘production companies’, most of which turn out to not actually produce anything more than the occasional wedding video. Finally, someone will take you on as something called a ‘runner’. This is a vague term that covers a variety of tasks, most of which could be better described by the word ‘slave’.

If you impress during your long years of unpaid tea-making and DVD-labelling, you may be lucky enough to be given the title of ‘researcher’. Result! You’ll still be doing pretty much the same as a runner only now you will be paid (badly) and allowed to use a computer, which you’ll use to cut and paste information from Wikipedia to turn into interview notes for overpaid, rude presenters like me.

Then, if you show yourself to be really adept at Googling and copying things from the Guardian website, you just might be elevated to the heady heights of assistant producer or ‘AP’. Finally, a bit of power. You’ll be trusted with a camera and you may even be allowed to leave the office and use it. You’ll excitedly contemplate winning a BAFTA for your insightful and moving film-making. The only problem is you’ll be working on either Wife Swap (series 637), Bargain Hunt Redux or Britain’s Fattest Dog.

“Getting into TV is a bit like seducing a nun. It can take years, success is far from likely and even if you do finally crack it, it will leave you feeling hollow and full of self-loathing.”

Once you’ve truly had all the integrity and enthusiasm kicked out of you, you’ll at last be ready to enter the career dreamland that is working as a director or producer. After years of struggle, you’re now the boss. You’ll be able to go out there and pitch your ideas to channels who will all say no because they’ve already spent their money on either Jonathan Ross’s suit budget or Anne Robinson’s botox.

But you’ll plug away, go for lunch with the right people, hobnob at the right parties, and eventually you’ll get the much-sought-after ‘green light’. This is what you’ve worked your whole life for: your first commission for your very own programme – a new reality TV show about seducing nuns.

It will be such hard work you will probably be dead by the age of 40. Either that or working as a commissioner for Channel 4. Possibly both. Some of the ones I’ve met definitely had fangs and kept the office blinds shut. Good luck.

www.dannyrobins.co.uk
How to get into the bestseller list

Our insider: Kate Long (BA 1987), author of bestselling novel *The Bad Mother’s Handbook*

It’s true that the publishing industry is fiercely competitive, but if you really want to join the ranks of bestselling authors, don’t let that put you off.

Writing a novel takes months, if not years, of solitary, maddening, often deeply discouraging graft. Only the very determined will succeed. So this is your first reason to be cheerful. Lots and lots of people want to be writers; a surprising number don’t actually like writing. If you do, if you come back to your desk time and again for the pure pleasure of it, you’re already ahead of the game.

When it comes to submitting your completed, ultra-polished manuscript, once again you can set yourself at an advantage. Slush piles are high, but an awful lot of what’s sent in is poor quality, badly presented, ungrammatical, shabby. Specific submissions criteria will often have been completely ignored, and instead of addressing the parcel to a particular editor, the owner of the manuscript may well have sent it off with some impossibly vague salutation – ‘The editor, Transworld’ or similar. This is the equivalent of sticking a note in a bottle and throwing it out to sea.

Target your submission not just at an individual whose name you’ll have researched through *The Writer’s Handbook* or via a publisher’s website, but at the right kind of outfit; don’t try to flog your sci-fi thriller to a house that specialises in historical romance. It may sound like obvious advice, but many new writers are convinced the genius of their work will somehow transcend such boundaries. It won’t.

Simply, your script needs to be picked up by the right person at the right time, and catch his or her interest pretty much straight away. Given there’s no formal recognised route to becoming a best-selling novelist – only a combination of hard work, talent, persistence and extreme good luck – your best strategy is to keep writing, and keep submitting. And remember, even the hottest manuscripts get turned down. Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* trilogy came back no fewer than fourteen times before someone spotted its potential.

So weep over rejection slips if you must, but then get straight back to work because there’s no age limit in this job, no three-strike penalty or sell-by date. Just enjoy yourself and tell the story you want to tell, using your own voice. After all, no one else can write your book!

Find out more at www.katelong.co.uk.

How to get into the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers

Our insider: Mary Bliss (BA 1949, Cert Ed 1950), Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers

There are three main methods by which one can become a Freeman of the Company: patrimony, apprenticeship and redemption. Anyone whose father was a member of the Company at the time of his/her birth has a right to membership by patrimony. Apprentices are accepted following a bona fide apprenticeship. To enter by redemption it’s necessary to be sponsored by two Liverymen, one of whom must be a member of Court.

My journey to becoming a Liveryman began at the Freshers’ Squash in 1946 when I joined the Society of Change Ringers, became an enthusiastic bellringer and eventually became Chairman of the Bells and Clocks Committee of the Council for the Care of Churches. As a result of this, in 1994 Sir George White proposed that I should become a Freeman of the Company by Redemption as I had given many years of service to caring for bells and clocks, especially in church towers. Three years later I was proposed to become a Liveryman, an honour which I gratefully accepted, having first been admitted as a Freeman of the City of London at a memorable ceremony at Guildhall.

What are the advantages? I would say the privilege of becoming accepted into an ancient society and participating in the heritage and customs of the past, as well as the opportunity to meet with leading figures in the world of horology, clocks and sundials.

The Worshipful Company of Clockmakers was established by Royal Charter in 1631. Find out more at www.clockmakers.org.
The University extends its sincere condolences to the families and friends of those alumni listed below, for whom the University has received notification of death.

Joyce Bolton (née Baker) (BSc 1941) died 6 May 2010, aged 90.
Dr John Tucker (MB ChB 1941) died January 2010, aged 92.
Marian Bird (née Thomas) (BSc 1943, Diploma 1944) died 5 March 2010, aged 88.
William Wilkins (BSc 1943) died 2010, aged 87.
Dr Susanna Elmhirst (née Gordon Foss) (MB ChB 1944) died 16 February 2010, aged 88.
Hugh Leech (BDS 1944, LDS 1944) died 1 February 2010, aged 88.
Helena Eason (née Morgans) (BA 1946, Diploma 1947) died 22 February 2010, aged 84.
Alec Smith (BDS 1946) died 26 November 2008, aged 86.
Thomas Spears (formerly Spyropoulos) (Comerce 1947–) died 2010, aged 93.
Dr Robert Drew (BSc 1948, PhD 1951) died January 2010, aged 84.
Leonard Grice (BSc 1948) died 23 December 2009, aged 86.
Dr William Lock (BSc 1948, PhD 1952) died 19 March 2010, aged 82.
Dr Philip Skeens (BA 1948, Cert Ed 1949) died 15 November 2009, aged 94.
Howard Beaven (BSc 1949, Cert Ed 1952) died 24 October 2009, aged 81.
Donald Gambier (MB ChB 1949) died 9 January 2010, aged 84.
Dr Geoffrey Milton (BSc 1949, PhD 1952) died 10 September 2009, aged 80.
Michael Tyrell (Cert Ed 1950) died 2008.
Malcolm Ward (LLB 1950) died 2010, aged 80.
Sir Michael Angus (BSc 1951) died 13 March 2010, aged 79.
The Rev Prebendary Raymond Dean (BA 1951) died January 2010, aged 82.
Dr Samuel Palmer (MB ChB 1951) died 8 March 2010, aged 87.
Dr Michael Simmonds (MB ChB 1951) died 2010, aged 83.
Walter Buckland (BSc 1952) died 8 November 2009, aged 84.
William Mash (LLB 1952) died 1 May 2010, aged 81.
Dr Alan Head (PhD 1953) died 9 January 2010, aged 84.
Brian Price (BA 1955) died 20 March 2010, aged 76.
Dr Michael Joyce (BSc 1955, MB ChB 1959, MD 1968) died 4 December 2010, aged 75.
Dr John Hartley (BSc 1956, PhD 1959) died 20 January 2010, aged 77.
Irene Parker (née Burton) (BA 1956) died March 2010, aged 75.
Dr David Matthews (BSc 1957, PhD 1959) died 16 March 2010, aged 76.
Dr Edwin Redman (BSc 1957, PhD 1964) died 27 February 2010, aged 74.
John Bull (BSc 1958) died 24 April 2010, aged 74.
Dr John Greed (LLB 1959) died 4 January 2010, aged 72.
Anthony Barnard (BA 1960) died 2009, aged 78.
The Rev Christopher Dormer (BA 1961) died 2009, aged 70.
David Fletcher (BA 1961) died 2 February 2010, aged 70.
Dr David Searle (BSc 1961, PhD 1966) died 31 March 2010, aged 73.
Michael Drew (BSc 1962, Cert Ed 1963) died 22 April 2010, aged 70.
Richard Barker (Cert Ed 1963) died 5 December 2009, aged 70.
Elizabeth Revel (née Boyd) (BA 1963) died 10 February 2010, aged 67.
Margaret Rose (née Matthews) (BA 1964) died 16 May 2010, aged 66.
Susan Barker (BA 1965) died November 2009, aged 66.
Dr Alan Parsons (MB ChB 1965) died 9 February 2010, aged 68.
Roger Stanbury (LLB 1965) died 6 April 2010, aged 65.
Philip Jackson (BA 1968) died 2010, aged 63.
David Morton (BDS 1968) died 27 September 2010, aged 66.
Michael Baker (BSc 1972) died 29 October 2009, aged 58.
David Eccles (BSc 1972) died December 2008, aged 58.
Dr Katherine Kuhn (BSc 1975, PhD 1978) died 23 March 2009, aged 54.
Susan Ince (BSc 1978) died January 2010, aged 52.
Emeritus Professor Richard Gregory (DSc 1983) died 17 May 2010, aged 86.
Piers Cheyne (BSc 1987) died 25 July 2006, aged 41.
Catherine Bull (MEd 1991) died 2 March 2010.
Dr Peter Durie (Hon LLD 2002) died 3 March 2010, aged 84.
Julie McCaughan (Diploma 2004) died November 2009, aged 34.

Please email any notifications of death to alumni@bristol.ac.uk
Events calendar 2010

Half of 2010 is already behind us, and what a year it’s proving to be, with over 20 events and the Bristol Alumni Reunion Weekend. The remainder of the year is set to be just as exciting, and we hope to see you at a Bristol event soon. Unless otherwise stated, further information and booking details are available at www.bristol.ac.uk/alumni/events or by calling +44 (0)117 928 7939. New events are regularly added so please check the website.

SEPTEMBER

Saturday 11 September 2010
First meeting of Bristol alumni in Cambridge
A drinks reception and dinner will be preceded by a talk by David Adamson, former Bursar at Bristol and now Head of Estates at the University of Cambridge, and Karsan Vaghani, Director of Capital Projects at Bristol, on ‘Challenges of rapid expansion: sustainable building for Bristol and Cambridge universities’.

Saturday 18 September 2010
Midlands Branch: Visit to the Shugborough Estate, near Stafford
Email timdrakeford@btinternet.com or south-1beam._@tiscali.co.uk or phone +44 (0) 1217 054 958 for further information.

OCTOBER

Wednesday 6 October 2010
London Branch: Annual lecture ‘Work: benefit, blessing or curse?’
Royal College of Pathologists, London
Professor Dame Carol Black CBE DSC (BA 1962, MB ChB 1970, MD 1975, Hon DSc 2003), the first National Director for Health and Work, will give this annual lecture of the London Branch of Convocation. Email medic@4088.co.uk for further information.

Thursday 21 October 2010
Understanding admissions, London
Join Lucy Collins (BA 2005), Head of Widening Participation and Undergraduate Student Recruitment, to find out more about Bristol’s admissions policies and procedures. There will be a Q and A at the end of the session.

Wednesday 27 October 2010
Lord Chilver of Cranfield, patron of the association, will host the fourth Annual London Reception.

NOVEMBER

Thursday 18 November 2010
A conversation with Andy McNab, London
McNab will discuss his writing, his army career and his insights into defence and security. Tickets cost £25. To book email sas@4088.co.uk.

18-30 November 2010
Galapagos Island cruise & Ecuador
Email ima@templeworld.com or phone +44 (0) 20 8940 4114 for a brochure and further information.

25 November 2010
Pub night for recent graduates, London
If you graduated between 2000 and 2010, come along for drinks and networking with fellow alumni.

DECEMBER

Thursday 9 November 2010
Convocation reception and awards ceremony, Bristol
The annual reception will take place in the Reception Room of the Wills Memorial Building. All alumni, their guests, staff and students are welcome.

Bristol Alumni Reunion Weekend 2010

Nearly 300 alumni returned to Bristol for the Alumni Reunion Weekend 2010. There was a packed programme of events. Guests heard lectures, visited their old departments, attended lunches, revisited old haunts, explored the by-ways of Bristol in the company of guides and much more.
In March 1939, aged 18, Geoffrey Eichholz arrived in England a penniless refugee. Following 'Kristallnacht', a short note from the Nazi regime expelled him from the Berlin Technical University and made it clear that he should leave the country. Harvard University had granted him a Refugee Scholarship to be effective at the start of the autumn semester in September 1939. Where to go until then? Distant relatives living in London offered to support him, so Eichholz fled Germany for England, arriving on a transit visa.

One of his English relatives, David Eichholz – a Professor in Classics at the University of Bristol – arranged with Professor AM Tyndall to take Eichholz on as an unpaid researcher in the Department of Physics. Eichholz spent a pleasant summer scanning photographic emulsions for Cecil F Powell.

When war broke out in September 1939, Eichholz was officially classified as a ‘Refugee from Nazi Oppression’ and granted leave to stay in the UK. But that same month, the US Consul refused his application for a student visa, citing the war as the reason. This time, Tyndall came to his aid, arranging for him to be admitted to Bristol as a first-year honours student with tuition fees waived. Eichholz was formally matriculated by Winston Churchill.

In May 1940, after Dunkirk, and a week before Eichholz was due to take his exams, the government declared Bristol a defence zone. All ‘enemy aliens’ had to leave the city; a week later all male ‘enemy aliens’ were interned. He was first sent to a holiday camp in Paignton, then to a campsite in Shropshire, and finally to the Isle of Man. When he was released in December, he found himself unable to return to Bristol as the city remained a defence zone.

On Tyndall’s recommendation, Eichholz was admitted to the University of Leeds to study physics, graduating with a first-class degree in 1942. Following war work on radar for the Admiralty, he returned to Leeds and obtained his PhD in 1947. From Leeds he went to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver as Assistant Professor of Physics, followed by a stint with the Canadian Bureau of Mines in Ottawa. In 1963 he went to Atlanta as Professor of Nuclear Engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he remains Regents Emeritus Professor of Nuclear Engineering.

Eichholz recently donated $25,000 to the University of Bristol ‘in remembrance of the gracious assistance extended to me by the University in my time of need’. The money will support bursaries for undergraduate students in physics and classics, and will commemorate both A M Tyndall and David Eichholz.

**Why did you choose Bristol?**

I didn’t. It was thanks to the generous spirit of people such as Tyndall that I was able to study at Bristol.

**What were your first impressions?**

My recollections of the place are coloured by the fact that we were at war. The summer of 1939 was sunny and warm. Powell’s lab was on the top floor of the physics building. There we were all summer, working away, listening to the Grammar School clock strike on the hour, while the rest of the world was so perturbed. When war broke out
in August most staff were still on vacation, so I spent much of my time fire-watching from the physics tower.

**What kind of student were you?**
Initially, I was relatively unprepared. I remember looking over a fellow student’s shoulder from time to time to be sure that I’d caught everything! I got a first-class degree from Leeds, but you wouldn’t have predicted that had you seen me during my time at Bristol. Class sizes were very small back then. There were just seven of us on the course. When King’s College London was evacuated to Bristol, 30 more students and faculty joined us. It was a bit of a motley arrangement, but looking back it worked quite well.

**And away from study?**
War made student life fairly austere. I’m sure students have a much better social life these days! Although we did all dash across the street to the Berkeley for a coffee at 10am.

**Were there any academics or other members of staff who made a particular impression on you?**
Tyndall made a huge impression on me, not just as an academic, but as a generous and kind man. Bristol was full of outstanding physicists: Mott, Heitler, Fröhlich, Powell. I also remember Dr Alan May, who was a King’s College London faculty member, because he gained a certain notoriety later: he was convicted of treason for selling secrets to the Russians!

**Where did you live?**
I stayed in a boarding house on Pembroke Road with a very nice landlady. In the second term, Tyndall was kind enough to put me up in his house in Westbury on Trym. In February 1940 my mother joined me in Bristol and we rented a small apartment on St Paul’s Road. She’d managed to leave Germany just a week before the war started on one of the last flights out.

**What were your highlights?**
Being in Bristol studying despite all the disruption and chaos. The matriculation ceremony in October was another highlight. All the new students lined up and we were received by Winston Churchill. He shook my hands and said: ‘I admit you’.

**And were there any lowlights?**
Yes, but it was nothing to do with the University. The war was on. My mother and I were trying to make do with what little we had. She fled Germany, leaving my father behind in jail. In 1943 the letter arrived saying that my father had died in Auschwitz.

**What are the key things that your time at Bristol gave you?**
It helped me to remain a student. If I hadn’t been admitted I don’t know what I would have become. Who knows?

**Do you ever come back to Bristol?**
I visited a few times after the war finished. In the late 1950s, on one of my visits, I remember a conversation with Professor Heilbronn during a stroll in the garden of Royal Fort House. The government was exerting pressure on Bristol to expand to 5,000 students. He was most annoyed and felt very strongly that this would undermine Bristol’s academic atmosphere.

**Do you have any tips or words of advice for Bristol freshers?**
Keep an open mind and stay curious. You have to be willing to adapt to changes in life.