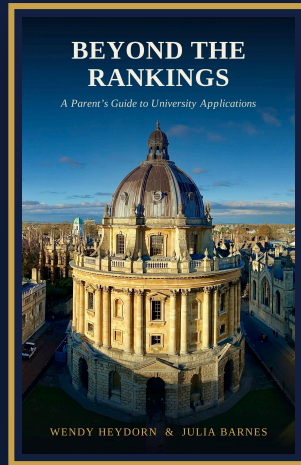




UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES — FREE EXTRACT

Applying for a Competitive University Course

*A Q&A with Jelani Allman,
Oxford Law Graduate, Admissions Mentor & Pupil Barrister*

AN EXTRACT FROM
Beyond the Rankings
Wendy Heydorn & Julia Barnes

FREE EXTRACT — ONE OF EIGHT EXPERT Q&AS IN THE FULL BOOK
A guide for parents of students in Years 11 to 13

Applying for a Competitive University Course

A conversation with Jelani Allman

We asked Jelani for his perspective on the questions that matter most to parents supporting a son or daughter applying for a competitive university course.

ABOUT JELANI ALLMAN

Jelani Allman is an Oxford Law Graduate, Admissions Mentor and Pupil Barrister, Gatehouse Chambers, whose work focuses on widening access to higher education and the legal profession. Alongside working with the Oxford Faculty of Law on access and outreach initiatives, he has spent the past six years tutoring and mentoring both UK and international students through organisations including Oxbridge Applications, Learnsights, and Target Oxbridge. He led the national social mobility charity Bridge the Gap, supporting over 100 applicants to secure places at Oxford and Cambridge. He also served as COO and trustee of State2Bar, helping state-educated students pursue careers at the Bar. His admissions guidance has been republished by the Oxford Faculty of Law, which also invited him to train Sixth Form teachers on preparing students for the LNAT and Oxbridge admissions.

DEGREE

BA Jurisprudence (Law), Wadham College, Oxford, 2024

SIXTH FORM SUBJECTS

Biology, Chemistry, Politics, EPQ (Constitutional Law)

FAVOURITE OXFORD TRADITION

Eating with friends every night at 'Hall' — dinners chef-cooked for you in the grand hall.

CURRENT ROLE

Entrepreneur, Pupil Barrister, Gatehouse Chambers (Oct 2026)

FIRST JOB

Sales Assistant, WHSmith, Gatwick Airport (2019)

How did you choose your degree course and university? What advice would you give to someone in Year 12 deciding on their degree course?

When choosing a degree, don't start by asking, "What do I want to study?" Instead, ask yourself two questions: "Do I have an idea of the career I want?" and, if so, "Does that career require a particular degree?" If the answer to both is yes, then your choice is largely made for you. If the answer to either question is no, you have much greater freedom, and that's where genuine interest should lead your choice. A degree isn't just a qualification; it's three to five years of hard, independent work, so you're far more likely to excel in a subject you genuinely enjoy.

It's also worth remembering that your degree doesn't necessarily determine your entire career. I know people who studied Biochemistry and now work in venture capital, and others who studied Geography before becoming lawyers. Many professions, for this reason, offer conversion routes that allow graduates from other disciplines to qualify later. That doesn't mean it's unimportant to choose carefully, but it does mean students shouldn't feel paralysed by the belief that this one decision will determine the rest of their lives, particularly if their intended career doesn't require a specific degree. The key is simply to understand your options before making your choice.

What is the single most important piece of advice you would give a student embarking on the university admissions journey?

My number one piece of advice is to stop looking for number one pieces of advice. There is no magic wisdom that transforms an applicant from unlikely to successful. Instead, it's the cumulative effect of getting lots of things right across the admissions process that makes the difference.

Focus less on trying to impress admissions tutors and more on becoming the kind of student they are looking for. Develop genuine curiosity, strong study habits and the ability to reflect on your own learning. Those qualities won't just strengthen your application; they'll help you thrive once you arrive at university, which is the goal that matters most.

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How might a parent balance supporting their child with giving them ownership of their application?

Parents should be coaches, not co-authors. The purpose of the admissions process is to understand a student's academic potential, not to see how polished an application can become with outside help. Personal Statements, essays and interview answers should therefore reflect the student's own thinking, curiosity and ability, rather than becoming a parent-led project.

The most valuable support parents can offer is emotional, with practical help used sparingly. Encourage your child to think more deeply, ask questions that help them refine their ideas, or help improve the structure and clarity of their writing, but resist the temptation to provide the answers. Ultimately, universities want to understand how the student thinks, not how well their parents can edit.

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When should students and their parents first start engaging seriously with the admissions process and what counts as too early, too late, or just right?

The first stage where university admissions deserve serious attention is GCSEs. Many students underestimate their importance, particularly when applying to highly competitive universities. At Oxford, for example, GCSE performance can carry significant weight alongside admissions tests and interviews. That doesn't mean one disappointing grade closes doors, but it does mean students should approach their GCSEs with the understanding that they matter.

That said, it's never too early to start thinking about university, provided the level of preparation matches the student's stage of education. The early years should be about developing curiosity, good study habits and a strong work ethic, not worrying about Personal Statements or admissions tests years in advance. The goal isn't to race ahead, but to make the most of each stage before moving on to the next.

What can parents do to prepare emotionally and practically for their son or daughter leaving home? What is usually the hardest part of the transition from school to university, for students and their parents?

One of the biggest transitions students face isn't practical; it's emotional. At university, particularly at more academically demanding institutions, positive reinforcement becomes much less frequent. Students still receive grades and feedback, but they often no longer receive the encouragement and reassurance that naturally accompanied school. Over time, that can become difficult, especially if the effort they're putting in isn't immediately reflected in their results.

Given this, a very valuable thing parents can do before their child leaves home is to help them develop the ability to reflect on and encourage themselves. Try not to let their sense of achievement depend entirely on a grade or someone else's praise. If they've worked diligently, help them recognise that effort first. Then encourage them to think strategically about where that effort is being allocated. The answer is rarely to work harder. More often, it's to identify the area where even a small shift in time or attention could make the biggest difference. Learning to work more intelligently, rather than just more intensely, is a habit that will serve students long after university. Ultimately, the transition is about shifting from seeking validation to seeking improvement.

What makes a candidate genuinely stand out, beyond grades?

Different candidates stand out for different reasons, and often not for the reasons they expect. One applicant might be remembered for presenting an original argument in an admissions essay, another for explaining a complex idea with remarkable clarity at interview. There is no single quality that makes every successful applicant memorable.

For that reason, I don't think students should focus on trying to appear distinctive. Instead, they should aim to perform as well as they can in every part of the admissions process. What you think is your standout quality may turn out to be something many other candidates demonstrate, while a strength you barely notice in yourself may be exactly what catches an admissions tutor's attention.

In truth, most successful applicants never know what made them stand out. What they do have in common is that they gave themselves as many opportunities as possible to demonstrate their potential, recognising that not every stage will go perfectly, but that consistent preparation across the whole process gives them the best chance of being selected.

What does good preparation look like?

A major mistake students make is confusing feeling ready with being prepared. In reality, students frequently feel anxious even when they've done everything they reasonably can, while others feel confident despite significant gaps in their preparation.

The key is to focus on objective readiness rather than emotions. For example, if you're preparing for a Personal Statement-based interview, you should know your Personal Statement so well that even a question about the definition of a word you've used wouldn't catch you off guard.

A practical way to prepare is to write down everything that could help, then separate it into 'must-dos' and 'nice-to-haves'. Once you've completed the must-dos, you're prepared, even if your confidence hasn't quite caught up yet. If time allows, the nice-to-haves can help build that confidence, but they shouldn't be mistaken for the preparation itself.

What is distinctive about the university experience at your institution and what should students and their parents know?

One of the most distinctive aspects of studying at Oxford, beyond what you'll read in the prospectus, is just how independent the learning is. Outside of tutorials, much of your learning is highly self-directed. Large lectures, independent reading and working at your desk make up a significant part of the academic experience, which develops independence but can also feel isolating if you're not intentional about building a community around you.

My advice is to create your own study group. Independence doesn't have to mean isolation. Some of my most valuable learning came from discussing difficult concepts with friends, testing each other's understanding and sharing different perspectives. Oxford offers an exceptional academic environment, but the students who thrive are often those who make the experience a collective one, rather than trying to navigate it alone.

Do you have any thoughts on the role of global university rankings and league tables? What should parents know about them?

Every university choice involves a trade-off because no institution is perfect. So, before comparing league tables, parents and students should first decide which factors matter most to them. Are graduate prospects the priority? Academic reputation? Student satisfaction? Being close to home? Once you're clear on what you're willing to compromise, league tables become a far more useful tool.

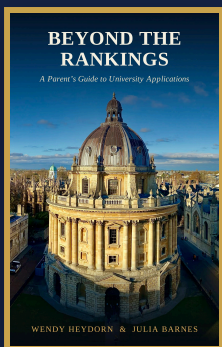
In most cases, league tables are valuable insights into an institution's overall reputation and graduate prospects. These provide a broad indication of the university's perceived prestige and the opportunities available after graduation — both of which can influence employability and are often important reasons for attending university in the first place.

That said, the importance of different rankings will vary from student to student. For some, measures such as student satisfaction, teaching quality or pastoral support may be just as important as academic reputation. Will your child thrive in a highly independent environment, or would they benefit from more structured support? Choosing a university with slightly lower prestige but a stronger overall fit can sometimes lead to a much happier and more successful experience.

This isn't to suggest that universities lower down for student satisfaction are unhappy places. Quite the opposite: some of the most academically demanding institutions have incredibly vibrant student communities. More often than not, the complaint is simply that students wish they had more free time to enjoy them!

Ultimately, league tables should be treated as one tool in a much wider toolbox, alongside visiting universities, speaking to current students and researching life on campus, rather than as the definitive measure of which university is "best".

Jelani Allman — Oxford Law Graduate, Admissions Mentor and Pupil Barrister, Gatehouse Chambers



THIS Q AND A IS AN EXTRACT FROM

Beyond the Rankings

A Parent's Guide to University Applications

Wendy Heydorn & Julia Barnes

Wendy Heydorn — former Director of Higher Education at Sevenoaks School, guiding around 4,000 students into UK, US and international universities; co-author of three Cambridge University Press textbooks.

Julia Barnes — Senior Higher Education Adviser at Sevenoaks School and an accredited US applications counsellor, specialising in UK admissions and Degree Apprenticeships.

With the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) reaching one million in the UK, helping your child find a positive path beyond school has never mattered more. University rankings tell you almost nothing about whether a course or campus is right for your child.

Beyond the Rankings is written by two Higher Education specialists with over 25 years of combined experience guiding students through UK, US and international university applications. This isn't an encyclopedia — it's a practical companion for the decisions that matter most, written in plain English, without the jargon or the assumption that you already know how any of this works.

Whether your child is in Year 11 wondering what comes next, or in Year 13 with a UCAS deadline looming, this book walks you through every stage with clarity, warmth and genuinely practical advice — exploring university options not only in the UK but internationally too, and giving you the questions that open conversations rather than close them.

INSIDE, YOU'LL FIND

- How to help your child choose the right course and university, based on fit, not just prestige
- Building a strong application profile through activities, work experience and academic interests
- Navigating Personal Statements and US College Essays, and preparing for admissions tests and interviews
- A clear, honest breakdown of what university really costs, and how to plan for it
- Degree Apprenticeships: how your child could earn a salary, gain a qualification and graduate debt-free
- Supporting your child through the transition to university life — academically, practically and emotionally

Each chapter includes a summary, key questions for your son or daughter to reflect on, popular myths addressed with facts and practical tips, timelines and checklists, useful links, and Key Advice for Parents. It includes various Q&A's with contributors in university admissions.

Beyond the Rankings — order on Amazon Kindle now!

Available on Amazon Kindle from 29 July 2026

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