curioo | Signature

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF 14 TO 17-YEAR-OLDS

Beyond grades. What universities now ask, in their own words.

Grades are only part of a university application. This guide shows what universities in the UK, the US and Asia, and selective universities in Europe, ask about beyond grades, quoted from their own application pages, and how a real project answers it.

1 **More than grades**
Where universities look beyond grades

2 **In their own words**
UK, US, Asia and Europe

3 **A strong answer**
What it looks like, by subject

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12 weeks, one mentor, one real project

1 · MORE THAN GRADES

Everyone has good grades. What makes your child memorable?

27.8%

of UK A-level grades were A or A* in 2024.
The most selective universities turn away many applicants who hold the grades they ask for.

When hundreds of applications show similar marks, the admissions officer turns to the rest of the application: what the student has done, why it matters to them, and what they learned from it. Universities give applicants several places to show this. Most applications use at least two.

Where universities look beyond grades

The personal statement or essay

UK: three UCAS questions, one about life outside school. US: the Common App essay and each university's own prompts. Asia: personal statements and short responses.

The activities list

Common App: up to 10 activities, 150 characters each. NUS: up to four achievements. Waseda's School of International Liberal Studies: up to three honours or activities.

A portfolio or research abstract

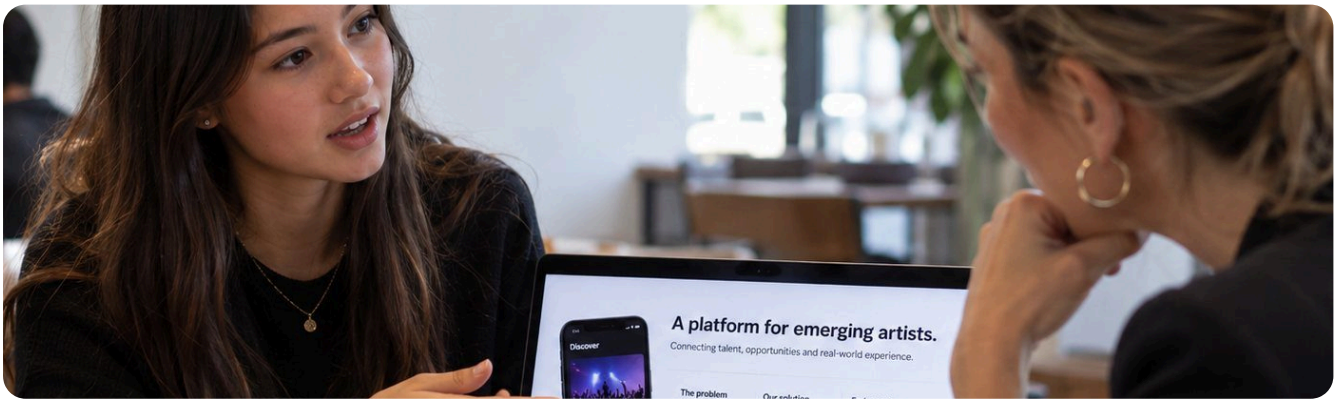
Optional uploads at some universities: a maker portfolio at MIT, a STEM portfolio at Caltech, and research papers or abstracts at Harvard, Yale, Brown, Columbia and Dartmouth.

The interview

Oxford and Cambridge interview shortlisted applicants, and many universities in Asia and Europe interview for some programmes. Interviewers often start from what the student has written.

The common thread: each one asks what your child has done, not only what they have studied.

A PROJECT THEY BUILT THEMSELVES GIVES THEM SOMETHING REAL TO SHOW, WRITE ABOUT AND TALK ABOUT.



The UK and the US

UK Every applicant must answer three questions

From 2026 entry, the UCAS personal statement is three questions, 4,000 characters in total. It goes to every UK university the student applies to.

Question 1	"Why do you want to study this course or subject?"
Question 2	"How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?"
Question 3	**"What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?"**

Link it to the subject. Oxford advises applicants to "focus around 80% of your personal statement on your academic interests". LSE asks for "critical engagement with the subject and your super-curricular activity", and Cambridge gives similar advice. Work outside school counts most when it connects to the course.

US Applicants need to show they are different

Most universities ask about student interest and projects in their essay or application questions.

> **"How have you been a creator, inventor, or innovator in your own life?"**
>
> CALTECH, 2026–27 SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY

> **"Describe something you created, designed, improved, or built."**
>
> PENN, MANAGEMENT & TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMME

> **"Tell us about an engineering or science-related project that you have helped build, design, create, or iterate in the past two years."**
>
> TUFTS, SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

- **Optional uploads.** MIT accepts a maker portfolio and Caltech a STEM portfolio. Harvard, Yale, Brown, Columbia and Dartmouth accept research papers or abstracts.
- **Every Common App university.** An Activities section (up to 10 entries, 150 characters each) and 300 words of Additional Information.

Quoted from UCAS and each university's admissions pages, checked October 2026. Requirements change each year. CURIOO is not affiliated with or endorsed by any university shown.

Asia and Europe

ASIA Leading universities provide a place in the application to show it

> **"List up to four achievements, co-curricular activities, or non-academic activities (e.g. volunteering work, competitive sports) and answer short response questions."**
>
> NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE, ASKED OF EVERY APPLICANT

- **NTU Singapore** runs an optional aptitude-based route, and lists "portfolio relevant to the programme applied for" as one way to demonstrate aptitude.
- **HKU, CUHK and HKUST** read a personal statement alongside grades. HKUST also asks for "Proof of significant prizes and/or awards, if any".
- **The University of Tokyo's College of Design** (first intake 2027) asks for three short descriptions of activities, with examples including "research activities, creative work, exhibitions, competitions".
- **Waseda, School of International Liberal Studies:** "Choose up to three honors/activities as you think the best in order".

EUROPE Selective universities look beyond grades

Most public universities in Germany, Italy and Spain admit on school-leaving grades and entrance tests. Selective and private institutions read more of the application.

> **"We would like to better understand what you are involved in outside of class."**
>
> UNIVERSITY COLLEGE UTRECHT, ACTIVITIES FORM

- **Leiden University College:** the LUC form lets applicants "share your motivation for studying global challenges, extracurricular activities, hobbies and interests".
- **IE University** invites "a portfolio of your work, diploma or prize which you feel will give us a better overview of you".
- **ESADE:** "your grades are important… but they are not the only factor to consider."
- **EHL** calls its essay "an opportunity for you to showcase your strengths, motivation and interests".
- **France:** every Parcoursup application has an optional section for activities outside school.

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A long list is not helpful. One thing they built, and can explain with enthusiasm works.

Admissions officers see many lists of clubs and certificates. What stands out is one piece of work the student chose, finished and can talk about in detail.

1
Linked to the subject
It connects to what they want to study, so it belongs in the statement, not only the activities list.

2
Real, not planned
Something exists: a product, a service, a campaign or a pilot that real people used.

3
Tested and changed
They have evidence of what people said and did, and what they changed because of it.

4
Theirs to explain
They chose it, so they can answer follow-up questions at interview.

Project ideas by subject

IF THEY WANT TO STUDY	A PROJECT COULD BE
Economics, business	A supply-and-demand study for a local food bank. They map weekly donations against need, find the shortfall, and run a targeted donation drive to close it, measuring the result.
Engineering	A low-cost grip aid for older people with arthritis, designed with input from an occupational therapist, prototyped and tested by three users.
Computer science	A web app that matches older students as tutors with younger ones at their school, launched and measured by sign-ups and repeat bookings.
Medicine, psychology	A peer-led exam-stress programme for younger students, with its effect measured by a standard wellbeing questionnaire before and after.
Environmental science	A food-waste reduction pilot with a school canteen or restaurant, measuring the kilograms saved over six weeks.
Law, politics	A plain-English guide to employment rights for teenagers in their first job, tested with 30 readers and checked by a lawyer.
Design, architecture	A redesign of a real community space, such as a clinic waiting area: user interviews, models, and a proposal presented to the people who run it.
Data science, maths	A public dashboard of local bus delays or air quality built from open data, with the findings sent to the council.

One project, used across the application

UCAS Question 3	A paragraph on what the data showed, how they closed the gap, and why it made them want to study economics.
Common App activity	*"Mapped 8 weeks of food bank supply vs demand; found a 3-week winter shortfall. Ran a timed school donation drive: 1.2 tonnes, gap closed."* (137 of 150 characters)
NUS achievements	One of the four entries, with a short description and the result.
Portfolio or abstract	A one-page summary with photos, data and what they would do next.
Interview	A story they can explain and defend, because they did the work.

Ideas and the example above are illustrations, not past student work.

4 · THIS TERM

Three things you can do at home this term

None of this needs a programme. It needs a conversation, one idea and somewhere to keep notes.

1 **Talk about the subject, not the university**

Ask what they would study if they could start tomorrow, and what problem in that subject annoys or fascinates them. The answer points to the project.

2 **Choose one idea, small enough to finish**

A small project that is finished and tested says more than a big plan. If they are stuck, the free **Project Finder** gives three ideas matched to their interests in about 10 minutes.

3 **Keep the evidence as they go**

Photos, notes, survey results and each version. Above all, what changed and why. This becomes the personal statement paragraph, the activity entry and the interview story.

Questions that get teenagers talking

- What's something you've noticed that doesn't work as well as it should?
- Who has that problem, and how could you find out if they care?
- What is the smallest version you could try in two weeks?
- What would you want to be able to say you did, a year from now?

Find a project idea, free

Three ideas matched to your teenager's interests, in about 10 minutes.

curioo.com/signature/finder

Build something real.
Stand out when they apply.

The Signature twelve-week programme for students aged 14 to 17. Your child takes an idea of their own from concept to a completed real-world project, with real evidence, a portfolio and a final presentation at the Showcase, guided by a CURIOO mentor. **We provide the structure. They do the work.**

12 weeks
online, alongside school

1 mentor
all twelve weeks, live every week

Up to 12
students in each cohort

6 checkpoints
each reviewed, with an update to you

2 to 4 hours
a week, including one live session

22,000+
CURIOO learners in 15 countries

	A SUMMER COURSE OR CLUB	A SIGNATURE PROJECT
What the admissions officer sees	Attendance	A completed project, with evidence
Who did the work	Often unclear	The student, with a mentor reviewing each milestone
What they can talk about	What they were taught	What they chose, tested, changed and learned
What they keep	A certificate	Project, evidence, portfolio, recorded presentation, certificate

They finish with four things they made themselves

A completed project
Not a plan or a poster: something that exists and was used by real people.

Real evidence
Interviews, tests and results, gathered and recorded by your child.

A portfolio
Written up to a standard that can sit in an application or be shown to an interviewer.

A final presentation
Delivered live at the Showcase, recorded, with questions answered.

Every student who completes the twelve weeks and presents at the Showcase receives a CURIOO Signature Certificate of Completion. CURIOO's Future Skills programmes are recognised by HundrED, PIEoneer, EdTechX and EdTech Breakthrough awards.

One mentor, all twelve weeks

Laura

Lead mentor · December 2026 cohort · Project, portfolio and presentation mentoring

A certified CURIOO Mentor who has training in, and has taught, entrepreneurship through real student projects. Laura leads the cohort from week one to the Showcase, so she knows your child's project, not just their name. Sessions are live and online; between them, she reviews each checkpoint and replies within the week.

HOW IT WORKS

Proof of what your child can do, before they apply.

Over twelve weeks your child chooses an idea, frames the problem, builds a first version, tests it with real people, improves it from what they learn, and presents the result.

What they can build

A product
Something people can hold or use: a physical prototype or an app.

A service
Something done for people, run for real with real users.

A campaign
Changing what people know or do, with results measured.

A social enterprise
A project that solves a community problem and can pay its way.

How the twelve weeks run

One live online session a week with the mentor and the cohort, independent work between sessions, 2 to 4 hours a week in total.

WEEKS	PHASE	WHAT YOUR CHILD DOES
1–2	**Discover**	Chooses the idea and frames the problem: who has it, how they know, and what a good answer would look like. Talks to real people before building anything.
3–4	**Design**	Turns the problem into a concept and a plan: what the first version must do, what it can leave out, how they will know whether it works.
5–7	**Make**	Builds the first version: a working product, a running service, a live campaign or a pilot, kept small enough to finish.
8–10	**Test & refine**	Puts it in front of real users, gathers what they say and do, improves the work from the evidence and records what changed and why.
11	**Pitch**	Builds a persuasive presentation and rehearses it with the cohort, taking questions.
12	**Showcase**	Presents to an audience, live online, and completes the portfolio.

Six checkpoints. You hear from us at every one.

1. **Problem statement** — Week 2
2. **Concept and plan** — Week 4
3. **First version** — Week 7
4. **User evidence** — Week 10
5. **Pitch rehearsal** — Week 11
6. **Showcase and portfolio** — Week 12

Each checkpoint is reviewed by the mentor, and you receive a short update after each one: what your child did, and what comes next.

DATES, PRICE AND PAYMENT

The December 2026 cohort.

Dates

- Starts Monday 7 December 2026
- Holiday pause 21 December to 3 January; resumes 4 January
- Showcase in the week of 8 March 2027
- Deposits accepted until 23 November; enrolment closes 30 November 2026
- Later cohorts start 4 January, 1 February and 1 March 2027

Session time

One fixed weekly session for the cohort, published before enrolment closes and confirmed in the pre-start pack a week before the start. Sessions are recorded, so a missed session can be caught up before the next checkpoint.

US$2,495

per student, paid upfront

12 weeks · weekly live mentoring · checkpoint reviews · Showcase. Up to 12 students per cohort.

How payment works

- Reserve with a US$250 deposit (non-refundable), or pay in full. Card payment through Stripe.
- Balance of US$2,245 due by 23 November 2026 through the payment link in your welcome email.
- Fees are not refundable once paid, so please check the dates first.

For CURIOOkids families

CURIOOkids alumni and siblings save 15% with the code **CURIOOKIDS15** at checkout.

Refer a friend

Refer a friend and you both save 10%. Your friend enters **REFER10** at checkout.

Why CURIOO

Award-winning Future Skills education, taught in 15 countries to more than 22,000 learners through CURIOOkids Studios for ages 2 to 12 and CURIOO Campus in secondary schools.

The same project method that schools buy as CURIOO Campus, delivered to your child in a small online cohort.

Safe by design, online

- Every mentor is screened before working with students
- Messaging is in the cohort group only; no private messaging between mentor and student
- Every live session is recorded
- You can raise a concern at any time: curioo.com/safeguarding

The Completion Commitment. If your child has attended the sessions, done the required work and met the milestones but has not finished their project by the Showcase, we continue mentor support free of charge for up to one month so they can complete it.

QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK

Before you reserve.

Does my child need an idea already?

No. The Project Finder at curioo.com/signature/finder gives them three ideas sized for twelve weeks, and the first two weeks are designed to shape an idea worth their time.

How much time does it take each week?

2 to 4 hours: one live session of about an hour, and independent work between sessions. Checkpoints fall every two to three weeks, so the load is steady.

What if my child misses a session?

Sessions are recorded; they catch up before the next checkpoint.

What if the project doesn't work?

Some don't, and that is often the best portfolio. Students are assessed on the quality of their thinking, their evidence and their response to what they learned, not on whether the idea made money.

Will it help with university applications?

It gives your child something real to show, write about and talk about: an answer to UCAS Question 3, a Common App activity, an achievement entry, a portfolio and an interview story. No programme can promise an offer.

Is there a certificate?

Yes. Every student who completes the twelve weeks and presents at the Showcase receives a CURIOO Signature Certificate of Completion. The portfolio and the recorded presentation are the substance; the certificate confirms completion.

Who owns the work?

Your child. Everything they make belongs to them. Showcase work is only featured by CURIOO with your written consent.

What happens after I pay?

A welcome email straight away with an onboarding form for the student's details and your consents; the pre-start pack a week before the start; and a short update after each of the six checkpoints.

Can we start later?

Yes. Cohorts in 2027 start on 4 January, 1 February and 1 March. Tell us at curioo.com/signature and we email you when that cohort opens.

How do I reserve a place?

Go to curioo.com/signature, choose "Reserve your place with a $250 deposit" or "Pay $2,495 in full", and complete the card payment. You receive the welcome email and onboarding link within minutes.

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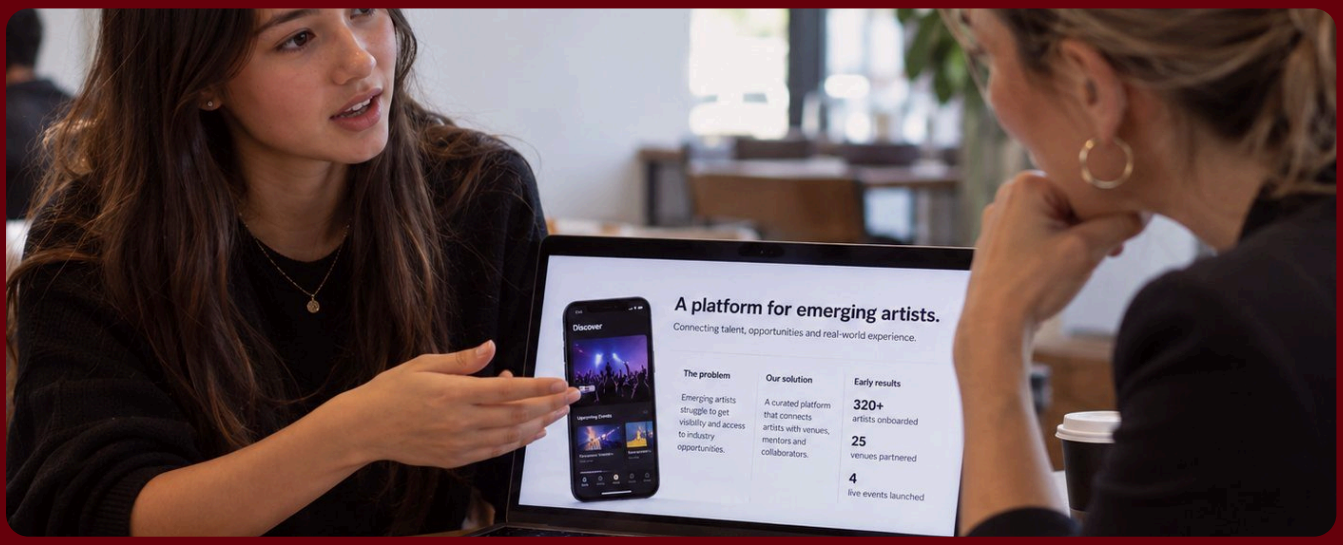
THE NEXT STEP

Start with one idea.

The free Project Finder asks your teenager about what they enjoy and what they might study, then gives three project ideas matched to their interests, each sized for twelve weeks. It takes about 10 minutes.

Find a project idea, free →

curioo.com/signature/finder



When you are ready, reserve a place at curioo.com/signature. Questions: hello@curioo.com