

University Open Days: Look beyond banners and balloons to make the best choice

Issued by [Rosebank College](#)

23 Apr 2019

In coming weeks, public universities and private institutions across South Africa will host a series of Open Days - events meant to showcase their offering to prospective students from the Matric Class of 2019. An education expert says it is essential that learners intending to study next year attend as many Open Days as possible to ensure they make an informed study choice, but more than that, they need to go with a strategy in hand to ensure they look beneath the surface to understand what their likely experience may be at a particular institution or campus.



“This is a very exciting time for Matrics, who for the first time will be able to get some real-life insights about life on campus and what their future might be like in coming years after school,” says Wonga Ntshinga, Senior Head of Programme: Faculty of ICT at The Independent Institute of Education, SA’s largest and most accredited private higher education institution.

“So we advise Grade 12s to determine without delay when various institutions will be hosting Open Days – an online search will suffice - and then make the effort to attend as many as possible.”

Ntshinga says there are many benefits to attending an open day, including 1) to get greater clarity on an institution’s offering 2) to visit different faculties at an institution 3) to speak to representatives of the institution who will be able to help you determine which qualification is a good fit if you are still uncertain 4) to get a feeling of life on a specific campus and 5) to weigh up the offering – academic and otherwise – of different institutions.

But he says there is one thing that prospective students must remember when attending Open Days, and that is to keep a level head and not get too starry-eyed by the fanfare of the day.

“Open Days are the perfect opportunity to get first-hand experience of a campus and its students, staff and academics. But

the first rule of Open Day is to remember that Open Day might not be representative of every other day. Universities put their best foot forward to impress and attract future students, but you have to be savvy and ask the right questions, as well as make the observations that will help you with this major decision.”

Ntshinga says prospective students should spend enough time on a campus to get a good look around, and listen to their gut feel while doing so.

“Look at the campus grounds, visit the library and the IT lab, note the condition of sports facilities, lecture rooms and even the toilets. If, for instance, an institution’s restrooms are questionable on an Open Day, chances are that they will be the same or worse during the rest of the year.

“If lecture rooms and the general environment look tired, dilapidated and unkept on this day, it is unlikely they will look better any other day of the year.”

If you get a good feeling about what you observe on campus, the Open Day then presents an opportunity to ask the important questions of university representatives, to gauge whether your degree will help you make a smooth transition to the workplace post-graduation, Ntshinga says.

To make that determination, learners should ask the following:

1. **Work-readiness:** How much practical, work-integrated experience is incorporated into the curriculum? Any good institution, whether public university or private, must have adequate practical learning integrated into the curriculum, and not focus purely on academics.
2. **Industry relevance:** Is there close cooperation between the faculty and lecturers, and is current industry practice reflected in the curriculum? Employers look for graduates who they know will be able to make a contribution from the first day on the job, which is why they recruit at those institutions that best prepare students for the real world of work.
3. **Student support:** What can you expect in terms of support – administratively, academically and post-qualification? Good institutions will have excellent student support from before you sign up until after you graduate, and this support can make a real difference in your higher education experience as well as your career.

“Doing your groundwork in the coming month, by identifying and attending Open Days at institutions you’ve been considering, as well as others you may not yet have considered but which may well turn out to be the right fit, will make a huge contribution to your ability to evaluate your options properly,” Ntshinga says.

“Additionally, you may be exposed to opportunities and qualifications you have not considered before, and which may resonate with you. Open Days are essential to making the best choice for your aspirations and provide insights that desktop research rarely does, so make the best of this limited window of opportunity.”

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