

The Stress-free Guide to Studying at University

A Student's Guide Towards a Better Life

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Leaving home and starting university

(or, Alone at last – rejoice or weep?)

Choosing your university and course with minimal stress. Preparing to leave home and start university. Packing, travel to university, and week zero. The first two weeks; academic, emotional and social issues to expect. Resource location and forward planning.

KNOWING WHERE YOU'RE GOING

There are plenty of sources of stress for would-be students before they even know which university they're going to. These might be well in the past by the time you read this book, but we're assuming that some readers will be given a copy by loving friends and relations while still at school, hence the inclusion of this section. Here are some classic early stressors.

- Should I be going to university in the first place?
- Which university should I go to (and does it make any difference)?
- What if I choose the wrong university?
- What if I choose the wrong course?
- What if I hate it?

We'll tackle the first question first – whether you should be going to university in the first place. Imagine that someone tells you 'Yes, you should go to university' or 'No, you shouldn't go.' Would you simply believe that? Probably not, and for good reasons; how could anyone possibly be completely sure of the answer to such a question? A better pair of starting questions would be; 'Is there any significant reason that I should not go to university?' and 'Is there any significant reason that I should go to university?' If you want a career as an architect or a doctor, for instance, then it's pretty clear that you'll need to go to university at some point. Conversely, if you've failed every exam you've sat in the last five years, then trying to go to university would probably be a bad idea. It's also worth thinking about

whether university is the best route to where you want to be, and whether another type of further education might be a better choice – it's a different route, with a different goal, not a second-best for those who can't get into university. This book is written with university students in mind, but that's just for focus, not because of snobbishness about non-university routes.

If you decide that university really is what you want to do, then there's the issue of when to go. You don't have to go straight from school; many students take a gap year between school and university. There are some significant advantages in this strategy. For instance, the gap year can give you more confidence, more experience of the world, and more idea of what you want to do with your life, depending on what you do in that year; it might also allow you to save some money to help you financially through your degree, and might bring you into contact with potential employers for when you finish university, not to mention a set of friends outside your university life. If your gap year turns out to be grim, this can fill you with a steely resolve to go to university, make the most of it, and go on to something much better. For one outstanding student we know, the key motivating factor was a desire never to work again on the night shift in the local pie factory. One risk to beware involves gap years which are okay, but not very wonderful; if you're in a mediocre job, then it's easy to slip into a rut, and never quite get round to breaking out of it (for example by going to university and looking for a job which is positively enjoyable). It's possible to go to university at any point in life, not just after a gap year; many people do part-time degrees or full-time degrees when in middle age (see Chapter 10 for more about this). It's worth remembering this option if you end up with problematic exam results; if you really want to go to university, there are second chances later in life.

The next set of questions involves choice of university and choice of course. You might find it useful to work through the tips about decision-making in Chapter 2. At the end, though, you'll still probably have niggling uncertainties. It's worth bearing in mind that all British universities and courses go through a long, detailed and painstaking process of quality and control and accreditation to ensure that they're of an acceptable standard – wherever you go, whatever course you do, it will be at least good enough. Good enough for what? That's the next part of the answer; each student is likely to get different things from the same university, or the same course, or the same module or piece of coursework. One of the bleakly entertaining aspects of being a lecturer is getting student feedback forms about modules you've taught; often, the same topic gets feedback ranging from 'brilliant!' to 'a total waste of time.' It's not possible for you or anyone else to predict with certainty how you'll feel about the course that you do; so as long as you've made a reasonable decision with the information available, there's no point in agonising about it (the section on obsessive thoughts on page 19 may help if you do find yourself agonising).

What if you hate the university or the course? It's not like being in the French Foreign Legion in the old days; at university, you're allowed to change your mind. It's usually possible to change course within your university; if you hate the university, then there's no law against leaving and trying again at another university – you have the rest of your life to try again. If you're considering this route, then it's wise to start taking advice as early as possible; there's a fine balance between giving the course or university a fair trial, and leaving things till too late. Student advice services should be able to help with this. A rule of thumb that you might find useful is that if you're calmly certain that you want to leave, then that's probably the right decision; if you're not completely certain, or you're angry about something, then you should give some serious thought to staying, and fixing the situation. Finding ways of fixing a situation is a very useful skill in life, and if you can get being at university to work for you, then it gives you a richer and more interesting set of options for your life than most institutions.

BEFORE YOU START AT YOUR CHOSEN UNIVERSITY

Some of the classic stressors in the first month at university are easily preventable, if you prepare in advance.

Classic stressor	What you can do about it
I don't know how to cook	Learn basic cookery; get a basic cookery book
I don't know basic maintenance like how to wash clothes or sew on buttons	Learn and practise; get a book on basic household management
I don't know how to budget money and plan things like food shopping	Learn and practise; the book on basic household management should cover this
I don't know what to expect when I get there	Read this book's sections on the basic principles of academic life; read the university's documentation; if possible, talk to someone who's been there before
I've never been away from home before and I'm not sure I can cope	Plan activities to keep you pleasurably occupied in spare time for the first few weeks; plan a couple of visits home

PACKING, TRAVEL AND WEEK ZERO

British universities have many venerable and colourful traditions. One of these is that on one weekend every year, large numbers of cars arrive at the university, usually driven by proud parents and weighted down with the

belongings of the nervous student. It's a fine recipe for stress, and for the sort of language which makes the tradition colourful. (There's another set of traditions that affects overseas students, who normally arrive by taxi or bus in the small hours of the morning, in the rain; we discuss those in Chapter 10 about mature students, part-time students and overseas students.)

In an ideal world, if you were going to a university which wasn't too far away, you could sweet-talk your parents into a reconnaissance trip a few weeks in advance, when parking and restaurants wouldn't be clogged with new students, and you could treat it as an enjoyable day out. In reality, you'll probably have to settle for detailed map work in advance, setting out in good time, packing a picnic in an icebag, and being prepared to park somewhere less than wonderful. It's also a good idea to think carefully about which belongings you actually need – you'll probably acquire a lot more during your first year, and end up with piles of clutter. Many students live at home while doing their degree, which at least spares them from this set of hassles, though usually at the cost of other hassles. They may experience other problems, of course. A significant difficulty is often that of negotiating house rules when you are legally an adult, living with your parents. This is an issue for anyone over 18 living in the family home, but is probably made more difficult when you know that other 18-year-olds, living away from home, have a lot more freedom than you do. It's worth talking things through with your parents before you reach 18, and clarifying new ground rules, if you need them. Another possible issue is that because you are living away from the university campus, it may be difficult for you to socialise with other students. You may experience a double whammy in your social life if your best friends from home are away at other universities. A bit of forward planning, such as arranging to stay over sometimes with a friend who lives on campus, may mean that you can get more involved in university life. Take consolation from the fact that you will probably continue your homework habit from school, and so may get significantly more work done than your fellow students who have to contend with the distractions that campus life brings.

What should you pack? It's worth remembering that it's not like going to Antarctica – there will be shops, so if you forget your toothbrush, you'll be able to buy a new one. However, if you arrive in the middle of the night because of transport nightmares, or if you're unable to get to the shops for the first couple of days, then it's advisable to include enough basics to keep you going. The following list includes things that most students find useful. It assumes you'll be in a hall of residence providing you with meals in your first year, which is what most universities offer; you will obviously need other items if you're in self-catering or private accommodation. Check with your university or landlord in advance about what equipment is provided and what you may need to bring with you.

- Coffee/tea/milk/sugar/biscuits; two mugs, two spoons, two plates (useful for socialising in the first week)
- Box of tissues
- Cash (in case the cashpoint machine has run out)
- Toothbrush, toiletries and towels
- Food for two days (including enough cold/dry/tinned food for one day just in case; if you don't need it, store it against future emergencies), plus plates, eating implements, and can opener
- Enough clothes for at least a week
- Paper, pens, folders for filing
- The university's documentation
- Map of the nearest town
- Something enjoyable to fill in your first two evenings – a book, game or activity – in case you end up alone and at a loose end
- A plan of interesting, useful and fun things to do during the first week (you can always modify or abandon this if you end up having a wonderfully interesting, useful and fun time anyway).

Be wary about taking:

- anything of great sentimental value (in case it gets lost or broken)
- anything excessively valuable or delicate (in case it gets lost or broken)
- anything potentially embarrassing, such as your cuddly Mister Squiggles toy (in case it is seen and not properly appreciated by fellow students).

THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

Another venerable tradition is that the first week of the academic year is chaotic. Nobody knows where anything is happening, or when it's happening; timetables change every few minutes; everywhere that you need to be is choked with vast hordes of lost souls heading in three directions at once. There are various unproductive ways you can react to this. You can express anger, and complain to The System at eloquent and sarcastic length about how nobody appears to know how to organise anything; you can sink into despair, and feel inadequate because you don't understand what's happening; you can give up and head down to the Union for a coffee or something stronger. None of these is particularly helpful, and they're likely to raise your stress levels sooner or later, rather than reduce them.

A more sensible approach is to apply a bit of thought. How likely is it that every university in the country happens to be incompetent in the first week? Not very; it's more likely that there's an underlying reason for the chaos (which there is, in the form of the inherent difficulties of timetabling without clashes when you don't yet have complete information about which

students are doing which modules, but we'll spare you the grisly details of that problem). That being so, anger and sarcasm aren't likely to fix anything or win you any friends. How likely is it that anyone will manage to get to all the right places at the right times, against this backdrop? Not very; it's wiser to prepare yourself mentally for missing at least one thing, and accepting that this can happen through nobody's fault. If you miss something important, then it's polite and professional to get in touch with the responsible person as soon as possible, apologise for having missed it, and ask what you can do to catch up.

In the next few sections we work through some of the areas which tend to bring stress in the first couple of weeks and look at ways of dealing with them.

Academic issues

A classic cause of stress arises from yet another time-honoured tradition, namely that nobody will tell you about the basic principles of academia. A simple example is that nobody will think to tell you the difference between a lesson which you experienced at school, and a lecture, a seminar and a tutorial, which you'll experience at university. A more subtle example is that usually nobody tells you what constitutes 'good writing' in their discipline. This can cause a lot of grief to mature students who are skilled in writing technical or business English, and who can't understand why their beautifully-crafted writing comes back with cutting remarks on it. This section contains a brief overview of the basic tools of the academic trade; you'll probably know 90 per cent of it already, but the remaining 10 per cent might make your life a lot easier.

In the early portion of your school life you're a conscript, and the teachers have the unenviable job of trying to push knowledge into your head. At university, you're a volunteer, and the traditional academic view is that it's now your job to pull knowledge into your own head – in other words, it's your responsibility to learn, not someone else's responsibility to teach you. It's also your responsibility to learn all the necessary skills for your chosen discipline, not just the fun bits. For instance, if you're planning to be a structural engineer, then a potential employer might reasonably expect that you can calculate whether your design will fall down in a strong wind. It's the lecturers' responsibility to make sure that you're exposed to the relevant knowledge; it's not their job to make it fun.

Every year, some hapless first year makes an embarrassing reference to 'teachers' or 'lessons' in front of lecturing staff. The lecturing staff consist of lecturers, senior lecturers, readers, professors and various other roles; the safest bet if unsure is to refer to them as 'lecturers.' Lecturers vary widely in their formality and philosophy; some are formal and aloof, others are

informal and approachable (though this doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be generous markers). Some are happy to be called by their first name; others aren't. If in doubt, calling them 'Dr Smith' (or whatever their name is) is usually a safe option.

Universities, university departments and academics come from a proud tradition of independence dating back to the Dark Ages, so they all do things differently. The usual basic units of teaching and assessment are as follows, but expect variations wherever you go.

The lecture involves someone standing on their hind legs and talking at you for about an hour, usually accompanied by enough PowerPoint to drive anyone to tears. Some lecturers take questions during the lecture, others prefer them at the end. Almost all lecturers hate students coming in late and students talking in lectures. If you're bored, have the courtesy to sit quietly at the back, and read a book or think about what you'll do at the weekend or, of course, what the consequences of not listening to the lecture may be. Most lecturers over-run, which irritates their colleagues in the next lecturing slot as well as their long-suffering students.

The tutorial used to involve small groups of two or three students discussing something with an academic tutor, giving the students detailed, individual support. It now usually involves twenty or thirty students, most of whom sit in sullen silence expecting the tutor to pour knowledge into their heads, and two or three of whom sit at the back texting their mates or having private conversations. If you're sensible and moderately assertive, tutorials are a good way of learning more about the topics that particularly interest you, and which may not be covered in detail in the lectures.

The seminar traditionally, has involved a student, or group of students, giving a mini lecture or presentation on a particular topic to an audience of other students and/or staff. The topic was then discussed. Seminars are much less commonly used in this way than they once were, due in part to the unfortunate tendency of the appointed student or students not to turn up. Nowadays, the term is used to describe a number of forms of tuition, most often involving an invited speaker giving a talk, followed by questions and discussion.

The practical involves practising the practical skills required for your discipline – writing software, or dissecting a language, or doing work in the lab. A lot of students view this as a waste of time, and then wonder why they have trouble getting good marks and a good job. A lot of departments react by making practicals compulsory. As well as teaching students, universities also assess them. Assessment takes the form of examinations and of coursework (which itself takes a variety of forms, such as essays, literature reviews, practical write-ups and research projects).

The exam is like the exams you did at school; see Chapter 4 on exams and assessment later in this book.

The coursework often looks like the coursework that you did at school. This can be a problem, because the expectations at university are different from those at school; you might be set the same question, but the type and level of answer expected may be very different. You also need to beware of plagiarism – which means copying material written by someone else and passing it off as your own work. Schools currently appear to vary in how strictly they police this, but universities take a consistently hard line, and will have no hesitation about failing you in a piece of work if you plagiarise. Universities now give explicit guidance about how to avoid plagiarism and how to reference other people's work, but if in doubt, it's advisable to check that you understand this properly. Proper referencing and avoidance of plagiarism are basic tools of your trade as a university student.

The final year project is used by most departments, but not all. It involves you doing a substantial piece of research-based work of your own, supported by an academic supervisor. The research project culminates in a written dissertation. Many students, and some departments, will refer to the whole process as a dissertation. If you view this as a positive opportunity, you can use it to get a foot in the door with potential employers; there's more about this in Chapter 8.

Practicalia

One major stressor is the unknown; another is feeling out of control. You can tackle a lot of the unknown by simply writing down a list of your dreads, and then finding out the answers. (It's a good idea not to put your name at the top of the list; this reduces the risk of subsequent paranoia about whether someone else on your course might find it ...) When written down, the list will probably look a lot less frightening – it often contains items like 'What happens if I fail this exam?' or 'Where are the printers?' Most of these questions you'll be able to answer for yourself with a bit of digging through the university's support materials. For the others, you can try an approachable member of staff.

You can tackle a lot of the control issues by doing some basic planning. For instance, you can plan to alternate between late nights and early nights for the first week, so that you have some balance between socialising and getting enough rest. It's a good idea to set aside some time each day during the first week for catching up with yourself – taking stock, planning, or just having some quiet relaxation. Even a very basic plan makes a lot of difference, and puts you sufficiently in control to start making some better-customised plans.

It's a good idea to locate resources as early as possible – printers, photocopiers, washing machines, and suchlike, but also fun resources such as university clubs, local attractions, and so on. Once term starts, it's horribly easy to end up spending all your time in the same few, familiar places, which might be okay, but which are not necessarily going to fill your mind with

wonder and good memories, so keep exploring. It's also useful to learn about the support facilities available at the university sooner rather than later, so that if you hit a crisis, you won't have the added hassles of having to find out where to go. There's a section on this at the end of this chapter.

Social life

At school you're stuck with your classmates whether you love them or hate them; if you're unpopular, then it's pretty hellish. University is different; you don't need to interact with other people on the course any more than you choose to, and there are literally thousands of other students who are potential friends, companions, inspirations, and lovers. If you've had a rough time at school, then university can be a wonderful experience of freedom, and a great source of social life; most students end up with life-long friendships that start in their student days. Freedom, however, often comes with a price, and for new students, that price is frequently anxiety about social life in a new environment. Here are some classic anxieties, and things that you can do about them.

Anxiety

I don't know anybody

I don't know how to strike up conversations

Everyone ignores me

I'm worried that I won't make any friends

People will laugh at me because of where I come from/how I speak/what they called me at school/my sexuality/my cluelessness

What to do

Nor do most of the other first years; strike up some conversations with people you want to get to know better
Read the section below on basic conversation skills

So what? Everyone else has their own preoccupations at the moment. Would you feel happier if everyone was looking at you?

Making good friends takes time. It's a good idea to make acquaintances in the first week, while everyone else is in the same boat and is approachable; you can then take your time and see which of them you'd want to have as friends

Try watching a good American sitcom; they usually have at least one unpleasant character who laughs at *everyone*. Avoid individuals of that sort; work on any bad habits that you do have; seek out people that you get on well with. Universities are usually pretty tolerant of diversity (if only because so many of the academic staff are raving eccentrics)

Making basic conversation

If you find yourself living somewhere you've never lived before, in an institution you're not familiar with, interacting with a crowd of people you don't know, the chances are that unless you are very confident and outgoing, you will at times feel lonely and friendless. This feeling is particularly noticeable when everyone else seems to be going around with 'buddies.' Do not be deceived. Some people do make best friends in their first week at university, but the chances are their friendships will change and develop throughout their university life. So how do you go about making friends? Here are some ideas;

- Remember that other first years, however confident they look, are probably feeling as lost as you are.
- Don't be afraid to start a conversation. Most people will not feel intimidated by someone catching their eye and smiling, or asking how they're getting on, and neither of you need to continue the conversation if you don't want to.
- Ask questions. Most people respond well to other people showing an interest in them. 'Where are you from?' 'What course are you doing?' 'Where are you living?' 'What's it like?' are fairly non-intrusive questions which could start a conversation. But don't interrogate. Give your potential friend a chance to reply.
- Listen about as much as you talk. Sometimes people open up if you volunteer information, as in; 'I'm from Huddersfield, how about you?' or 'I'm reading German, what are you studying?'
- Don't be desperate. Nothing frightens other people off so much as someone who is too persistent or intrusive. It takes time to build up friendships, so get to know people gradually. You're most likely to make friends with people you see frequently, anyway, so you'll have time to do this.
- Take time to assess the context. This is particularly important in terms of sexual relationships, especially if you are not the same age, or of the same cultural background as most of your fellow students, as the following examples will demonstrate:

One of us knew a middle-aged, recently divorced male postgraduate who was under the impression that sexual morals amongst undergraduates were so loose that he would have no problem making sexual conquests. Most of the female students he met found his behaviour offensive and disturbing. It was only after one student took him aside to have a long, serious conversation that he realised how wrong he was. Another friend, a recent graduate, accustomed to the relatively safe informality of university, once made the mistake of inviting a male work colleague back to her flat for coffee after a

social event. She discovered that his idea of 'coffee' was very different from her own, and she had considerable trouble persuading him to leave.

Emotions – homesickness and the like

No matter how socially skilled and popular you are, it's still likely that you'll go through some challenging emotions in your first weeks. You'll be at the bottom of the status ladder – there's nothing lower in the university than a new first year undergraduate – after being at the top of the status ladder in your school. That's inevitable, and it's wise to learn to live with it; you'll have the same experience when you start your first job after graduation, and quite possibly have similar experiences when you're promoted into a new role.

You'll also probably be homesick. This isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign that you care about the people you're parted from, which is not a bad thing. At a practical level, if you feel that you have a reasonable level of understanding of what you're doing at university, and control over your situation, that will reduce the anxiety that can be associated with homesickness – the desire to flee back to somewhere safe and comforting away from a stressful and incomprehensible new world. That can nonetheless leave the feeling that, no matter how much you like university, you still like somewhere else and want to be there. If home isn't too far away, then you can try scheduling some visits there in the first term – again, if you schedule them in advance, rather than fleeing home on the spur of the moment when it all gets too much, then you'll feel better all round.

Part of being at university is the getting of wisdom, and that can involve pain. So do many of the good things in life, there's usually a price for anything worthwhile. One of the things you'll need to come to terms with is that life involves change, and that you can't avoid change forever. Even if you had stayed back home, it wouldn't be the same 'back home' as it was before. You wouldn't be at school any more; many of your friends would have moved away to university or to jobs; you'd be starting a new job yourself, or starting to experience unemployment. That's probably not the most immediately cheering thought if you're reading this in a lake of tears while wishing you were back on the sofa at home watching TV with your mates, so here's a more positive thought. Stay in touch with the good bits of life at home, including your friends; have some pictures and objects around that give you good memories; think about the positive aspects of life at home, and remember that you can go back there when you want to. Do this in a pleasant setting at university, rather than one with bad associations. This should help you to have a balanced view of the good things in both bits of your life, rather than a view of all university things as being bad, and all home things as being good.

Resource location and forward planning

You'll probably run into some sort of minor hassle eventually; when that happens, it's useful to know about the support facilities available to you. It's a good idea to identify what they are in advance, so you can find them immediately when you need them. The academic system can be supportive, to an extent, which often surprises students. All universities have free student support services, such as counselling and financial advice; all universities also have administrative procedures which will take account of students' personal problems when these are likely to affect their marks in examinations and coursework. The sensible thing is to find out about these forms of support as early as possible, so that you don't need to look for them when you're too upset to think clearly. They'll probably be in the student handbook, or failing that, the department secretaries and your personal tutor will be able to tell you. Appendix 2 lists the main support facilities that most universities offer, and has space for you to fill in their contact details.

If external events look as if they could adversely affect your academic work, tell your tutor as soon as possible and ask what you need to do. You may need documentation to show you have been ill, or involved in an accident, for example. Usually you just need to fill in a form saying that you'd like extenuating circumstances taken into account, and to provide some evidence that the extenuating circumstances really exist. Sometimes you might not want any of the academic staff to know the details of those circumstances; the usual way of handling that is to ask the counsellor or doctor treating you to write a letter saying that you are going through distressing circumstances, without saying anything about what they are. (We've said 'usually' only because we can't absolutely guarantee that this applies everywhere, but it's been the case everywhere that we know about.). There's a further section on extenuating circumstances on pages 53–54.

SUMMARY

Almost everyone finds the transition to university stressful for some or most of the time (a few people just find it exciting). It's tempting to agonise about whether you've chosen the right university and the right course, but as long as you've done basic homework, then there's no point in worrying about your choice; it's more important to work out how to make the most of where you end up. You'll probably feel lost and clueless at the start; so will everyone else. You'll also not have your old network of friends; nor will anyone else, and this is a chance for you to grow out of what you were at school and into someone new, with a fresh start in life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTED FURTHER RESOURCES

Lucy Clarke and Jenny Hawkins's *Student Survival Guide* (How To Books, 2001) is popular with students, and covers similar topics to this book, but from a different perspective – they write about how to survive student life and enjoy it, whereas our focus is on how to handle the potentially stressful parts of it.

Another valuable resource which is easy to miss is your university's handbooks. When you start at a university, The System usually gives you a lot of written information. Most students are too busy at this point to read it properly, and it then gets lost at the bottom of the filing stack. Usually there's a university handbook and/or a department handbook and/or a course handbook somewhere among it, and these typically contain a lot of very useful practical information about facilities, support, procedures, and so on.