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University



A guide for parents

The
Guardian

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UK unis are not the only option

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Introduction
Sarah Jewell



Once your child has decided where to go, plan your new life

You wave goodbye to your child and drive away with a lump in your throat - it's a moment of grief but also of celebration. In this supplement we give advice to parents and carers on supporting their offspring through the whole

university process. There are lots of discussions to have. What subject to study? Which uni to go to? How to write the personal statement?

Where to live? Parents have a significant role to play in this. As one admissions officer says: "Be supportive and listen to what your child wants". Going on an open day together is a good way to get a real feel for a place. "Some of the places were lovely, but the courses weren't for me, or alternatively I didn't like the location," says Kristen Shorey, who went on lots of open days with her mother. And once your child has decided where to go, start preparing for their departure and your new life.

As one parent says: "What greater pleasure than to see young people mature and do what they were always supposed to do, which is flee the nest?"

"What greater pleasure than to see young people mature and do what they were always supposed to do, which is flee the nest?"

And they're off ... A new chapter awaits for you and your kids - embrace it

University presents plenty of opportunity for both parties, but be prepared to support each other if it's not all roses

Rachel Hall

The day your child leaves for university is one of mixed feelings. You will have been working up to this day for a while: encouraging them to do their best at school, visiting open days, and celebrating when they land their place. But there will be apprehension, too. What if they don't take to their new life? And what about you? What if that empty bedroom makes you feel lonely?

The key to a successful transition, for both parents and their children, is preparation - and that starts with the application process.

"The best way for parents to support their children with the application process to university is by understanding the process for themselves and by being available to help when needed," says Pete Edge, director of conversion and enrolment at the University of Law. "Depending on your child, that could be a simple addition of application deadlines to the family calendar or, for those who need more of a prod, it could be getting involved with personal statements, interview prep and trips to university open days."

Try to arrange a few open day trips together during year 12, as applications are completed early in year 13, but remember that, as a

parent, you're there to accompany and advise - not make the final decision. "The best advice is to ensure that children feel empowered to assert themselves, and that they can go to their parents when they need it," says Paul Woods, associate director of recruitment at Middlesex University. "A lot of parents do go to open days with children, but some won't want that, so it's about signposting the need to visit the campus, empowering them with what they should be asking and enabling them to look for themselves."

The months before university starts is also the time for parents to teach their children more about independent living. Ideally this should just be topping up on skills, says Jeremy Todd, chief executive of the Family Lives parenting charity: "The sooner life skills teaching starts, the better. It shouldn't be a mad week at home before leaving working out how the washing machine works."

As a bare minimum, think about helping your children master how to cook five balanced meals. You can also give them the lowdown on which supermarkets will offer the best value.

Try to anticipate the extra details that will help new students settle in, says Elizabeth O'Shea, a parenting specialist. When she was preparing for her eldest daughter to take up a place at St George's, University of London, they went to the university to look at the room she had been allocated and spent time working out what she could take from the family home. The pair drew up a list of new items that would help turn her bare dorm into a homely space that reflected her personal tastes. They also explored the local area, sussing out the lie of the land and local shops. "It's not always feasible, but it's useful if you can," she says. Once the university has been picked, the A-level grades reached, and the bags packed, then it's time for the big move. Lisa Heffernan runs the Grown and Flown website, aimed at parents of teenagers and university-age children. She says it's important to explain to new students that homesickness and anxiety are a natural parts of the transition. "If you just tell them that these will be



▲ Box clever: bring items from home to make a bare halls room your own
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

the best four years of their life, and then they get homesick - as over half of kids do - they can end up feeling they've done something wrong, and that everyone else is having a good time, while they're not."

Staying in regular contact is an obvious remedy - although it's important to work out boundaries in advance, as daily calls can be stressful. This can be particularly difficult in an age of constant communication: the temptation to bombard on WhatsApp is strong. "We're blazing a new trail here," explains Heffernan. "No generation has previously been able to stay in contact 24/7. We need to find out how to stay emotionally close as a family, while still allowing our kids to become the independent adults they need to be."

Angelika Motycka, a student at the University of Law's Chester campus, appreciated her parents'

offer to come home whenever she needed to. It was important that she felt she could contact them whenever, even in the middle of the night. "It's quite stressful trying to fit in at university for the first few weeks," she says. "But later on you don't realise you've been there for three weeks already."

To resist the urge to smother, parents need to also look after themselves. Ignore trite advice about finding new hobbies - they won't replace the greatest loves of your life, advises Heffernan. Instead, look for strong, meaningful connections: charity work, reconnecting with your partner, seeking out old friends. In particular, finding other people who've been through the same experience, whether in your online social networks or the real world, can remind you that the way you're feeling is totally normal.

"We need to stay emotionally close, while allowing our kids to become independent adults"

Lisa Heffernan
Grown and Flown

Prepare and support, but take a backseat Tips for a 'safe landing' at university

Know that your children are not you

Lots of parents obsess over the return on investment their children will get from university, says Paul Woods, associate director of recruitment at Middlesex University. Consider value for money, but don't try to shoehorn your child into a degree they're not suited to.

Guide them through their decisions

Pete Edge, director of conversion and enrolment at the University of Law, recommends parents help their children choose the right universities by drawing up a "personalised scoring matrix". Points should be accorded for location, ranking, living costs, employment stats, and - for example - nightlife or sports, depending on their interests.

Structure how you teach life skills

"From the age of 13 our children cooked one meal a week for the family, so they were fully able to cook before leaving home," says parenting specialist Elizabeth O'Shea. She also recommends dividing their term's

budget by the number of weeks plus two, so there's a little bit of wriggle room. But acknowledge that this will be tight: "It's almost like a challenge - can you manage on this amount of money?"

Set clear parameters for communication

"Have that conversation early, rather than at a point where it might become stressful," advises Jeremy Todd, chief executive of the Family Lives parenting charity. "And really make sure that it remains light and non-confrontational." Use this time to discuss key concerns around mental health and wellbeing, and the consequences of drugs and alcohol.

Acknowledge the empty nest

The best way to cope is to look after yourself. Lisa Heffernan, who runs the Grown and Flown parenting blog, recommends treating yourself to a holiday after drop-off. "If you can afford it, plan something to look forward to, because there can be an enormous feeling of being let down when you first walk away," she says. **RH**



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- **15 January 2019, 18:00**
Applications for all other undergraduate courses must arrive at Ucas. Make sure you double check your course's application deadline.
- **25 February 2019**
Extra opens. If you haven't received offers from your five choices (or you've declined offers) you can now use this service to add another choice.
- **1 May 2019**
Reply to any offers today if you received all your decisions by 31 March 2019.
- **2 May 2019**
Universities and colleges must decide if they're going to make you an offer by today - if you applied before 15 January.
- **6 June 2019**
Reply to any offers today if you received all your decisions by 2 May 2019.
- **20 June 2019**
Reply to any offers today if you received all your decisions by 6 June 2019.
- **30 June 2019, 18:00**
Applications received before this time and date will be sent to the relevant universities; those whose applications arrive after this time are entered into Clearing.
- **4 July 2019**
Your last chance to add a university using Extra.
- **5 July 2019**
Clearing opens, International Baccalaureate results published.
- **11 July 2019**
If you applied before June 30, your universities should decide whether they will make you an offer by today.
- **18 July 2019**
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- **15 August 2019**
A-level results day. Adjustment opens for students whose grades are higher than expected.
- **31 August 2019**
Last day for meeting any remaining offer conditions. Adjustment ends.
- **20 September 2019**
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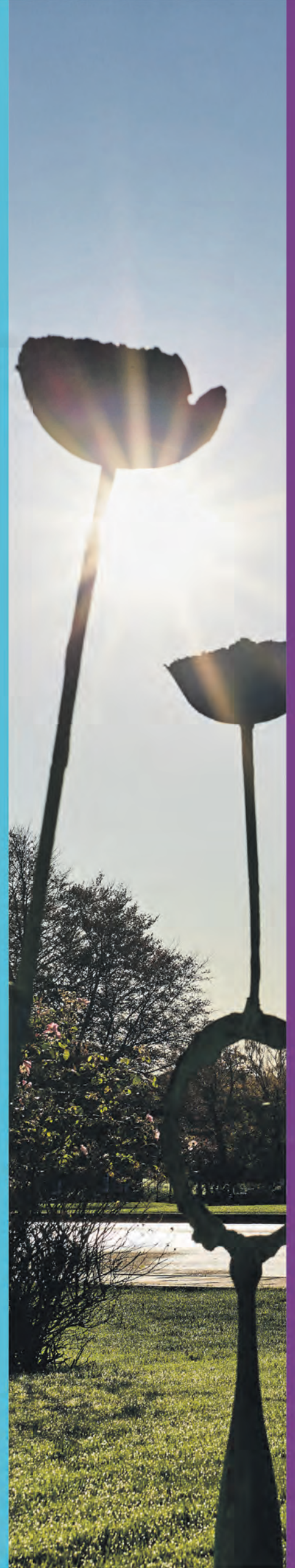
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How to apply

'Talk about the subjects they're passionate about'

An in-depth chat about what your child enjoys will give you a shortlist; then it's time to ace that application

Lucy Jolin

When Sammie Scott, 18, began the application process, she found that practical support from her parents was key. "As much as university is my own decision, it will affect the rest of my family too," she says. "I wanted to make sure they were evaluating things in the same way I was. It was really helpful for me to be able to talk to them about everything."

In theory, the application process is simple. Confirm grades, choose courses and universities, write a personal statement, send the application off and wait. But in practice, the process for most students is far less cut and dried - and parents can play a big part in helping them to the right decision. "Begin discussions with your child early," advises David Seaton, assistant director, student recruitment and admissions, University of Bedfordshire. "Be supportive, and listen to them."

Scott knew she wanted to do fine art, English or illustration, and started by researching the courses herself, encouraged by her parents. "Her father, Steve, and I helped with very practical questions: what's the content of the course; what do other students say about it; does it have a practical or business edge; and what are the outcomes for former students?" says Sammie's mother, Fiona Scott.

Deborah Green, director of student recruitment at the University of Hull, says this kind of open discussion can be hugely helpful. "Talk about the subjects they are passionate about, what inspires them and what they hope to achieve from further study and their career," she says. "If they choose a course they love, they are much more likely to be engaged, perform well and enjoy their time. And always bear in mind that university offers subjects and courses they will not have had a chance to study before."

Sometimes, settling on a course will help to narrow down the choice of university choice - but if not, the next big decision is where to apply. Again, parents can help - but not too much, advises Seaton. "I've encountered parents and students at open days where the student is

almost not allowed to say anything. The parents are asking all the questions. They may have genuine concerns, but, ultimately, it has to be the student's decision as to where they go and what they study."

Fiona Scott suggests having some honest conversations about practical issues. "We talked in-depth about where the courses she fancied were - distance from home, practicalities around travel and money, what things would cost and the chances of getting a part-time job - as we are not in a position to provide financial support."

Seaton advises parents to memorise the timetable for applications, to ensure no deadlines are missed, and Green says they can be hugely helpful when it comes to writing the personal statement. "Encourage your child to spend time on their personal statement, write as many drafts as is needed and proofread the final version," she says.

Offering support where it's needed - and backing off when it's not - can make all the difference. Sammie Scott has now received an unconditional offer to study fine art at the University of Gloucestershire. And while she's put in the hard work, she's hugely grateful to her parents for their encouragement.

"Because I want to study the arts, it has taken me longer to find the help and advice I needed to put in my application, because I do feel there is a lack of encouragement for people to pursue creative industries," she says.

"However, it has definitely given me a newfound confidence in my abilities and attitudes. Even if I don't always get things right, I know that my parents teaching me to never give up is what led to my unconditional university offers."

▶ Parents can help match a child's interests and strengths to the vast array of available subjects

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

'Ultimately, it has to be the student's decision as to where they go and what they study'

David Seaton
University of Bedfordshire



◀ Let's talk about you: the personal statement can make or break an application

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES



Pens in need

How to help your child nail their personal statement

● "Get them to pretend there is one place left on the course, and they are competing with other students with the same grades. Why should the university give this final place to them?"

Deborah Green, director of student recruitment, University of Hull

● "Encourage them to complete a first draft of the personal statement by June of year 12, so they can see where there are gaps and work towards gaining key knowledge or experience."

Sophia Milnes, student recruitment and outreach manager, Leeds Trinity University

● "Proofread the final version. I see lots of statements with grammatical errors, or sentences repeated because they've been copied across from somewhere else."

Tom Kidd, head of admissions, University of Gloucestershire

● "The clue is in the title - it's about the applicant. We look for reasons why the applicant has chosen this course or pathway. They can have all the Duke of Edinburgh awards in the world, but we need to be assured that they will succeed on this particular course."

David Seaton, assistant director, student recruitment and admissions, University of Bedfordshire

● "Students often find writing their personal statement tricky. This might be the first time your child has had to write something that really 'sells' them. If they're struggling, take a look at what the universities they're applying to want. If it feels right, offer to brainstorm some ideas together."

Hannah Morrish, student choice and HE lead, TheStudentRoom.com



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Experience

‘They are more mature than I was. I didn’t always show up to lectures’

‘The lecturers strike just happened and that was a big deal. We got involved in a massive protest’

Emily Aitchison
Nottingham University student

Linda Aitchison, a PR company director, studied modern languages at Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Her twin daughters are in their first year of university in Nottingham

Interview by Abby Young-Powell

I was excited for my girls when they went to university, but I also miss them very much. We lost their dad when they were just 13, so it was hard when they left, because this was always going to be a time for me and him. But it has also given me more independence and I’m doing things like getting the house sorted.

I’m proud that they’ve worked so hard and done so well. We text and call regularly and I follow them on Instagram. They enjoy university, but I think there is more pressure now because of fees. I had a great time when I was studying. I worked in a bar and partied a lot, so I’m surprised my girls don’t seem to go to parties as much.

I think they are more mature at their age than I was back then. I didn’t always show up to lectures; I was meant to study Italian, but didn’t go. And I wasn’t as involved in activism as they are, because I

didn’t have the confidence. Both my daughters are involved in political stuff and I admire them for it. Sometimes I hear them having conversations about politics, economics or international relations and I’m blown away by how knowledgeable they are.

University is more expensive now, but it has also changed in positive ways. I once lived somewhere with a toilet next to the bed and I doubt that would pass checks now. If I was a student today I think I’d work harder and have a more academically enriching experience.

Emily Aitchison, 19, is studying politics and international relations at Nottingham University

Me and Mel were really excited to go away to university because mum told us how good it would be. I was looking forward to living with loads of young people. I wasn’t really homesick, but I did miss Mum, even though we text every day.

I don’t think people go out less. At uni you can go to parties all the time with your friends and have fun. Mum doesn’t know how often I go out, but I don’t think she’d mind. The lecturers strike just happened and that was a big deal. We got involved in a massive protest. It’s really easy to get involved in things these days, because of Facebook.

I think there is more financial pressure now, but on the other hand there’s loads to do, and university is cool because you meet people from all over the place.

Melissa Aitchison, 19, is studying politics and international relations at Nottingham Trent University

I was so excited to go to university, because everyone says how amazing it is. I was also nervous because I knew Mum would be on her own, so I make sure I stay in touch. It was harder than I expected to make friends at first, so I needed Mum on hand. Then one day I met a girl on my course and someone in my accommodation, and we’re best friends now.

I enjoy how modern my course is. We talk about things like Brexit, and I’m in the feminism society and the politics and international relations society. I also really like that I’m in the city centre and can go out with my friends easily.

The stereotype of students - that we never turn up - hasn’t really changed, but I don’t think that’s true any more, because everyone works hard. Everything is also online now - so lecturers post loads of information after lectures, which is great.

I think my mum didn’t have the same worries about money; I have to pay loads more than she did.

**University evolution
Key milestones**

- 1990: The Student Loans Company is introduced; in its first year, it provides 180,200 students with an average of £390 to help towards living costs.



► *Sea change: Brighton Polytechnic College became a university in 1992*
PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY

- 1992: Polytechnics and colleges of higher education become universities, following the Conservative government’s Education Act. They can now award their own degrees.
- 1994: Modern apprenticeships are introduced.
- 1994: For the first time, more women than men enrol on undergraduate courses.
- 1998: The Labour government introduces tuition fees for the first time. Students are now required to pay up to £1,000 a year for tuition.
- 2006: Universities are allowed to set their own tuition fees and the cap is increased to £3,000 a year.
- 2010: Student protests against a planned hike in tuition fees erupt across the country. As many as 50,000 people are estimated to have attended a march in central London.



► *Protests in London’s Trafalgar Square*
PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY

- 2012: The tuition fee cap increase of £9,000 a year comes into effect.
- 2016: The government scraps maintenance grants for the poorest students.
- 2016: Britain votes to leave the European Union (EU), leading to concerns over international students, university funding and the Erasmus programme.



► *International student applications are on the increase.*
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

- 2018: UK universities report an unexpected rise in applications from international students. Vice-chancellors urge action to stop an estimated 60% fall in EU students post Brexit. **AY-P**

Accommodation

On or off campus, at home or in halls ... it's up to you

With options to suit every circumstance and budget, uni accommodation can be whatever you want it to be

Abby Young-Powell

There's more to student housing than finding a new bedroom. For "commuter" students living at home and studying locally, it can be a time to renegotiate the family living dynamics. For those studying further afield, this will be their new home - a place to make friends, develop independence and maybe even learn to cook.

Many first-year students start off by living in university-owned halls. This can be the safest option, says Paul Burns, accommodation office manager at the University of Manchester, because "there are staff and mature students around to help". Another benefit of halls is that they are the ideal place to meet the same situation, says Rachel Bell, residences manager at the University of Southampton.

Live on or near the campus and life may be a little more convenient - you'll be close to university facilities such as the library and computer labs, for example. But being off campus and closer to the city, with "a bit of separation", is no bad thing either, according to Bell. "There's potentially more space and you

▼ Chamberlain Halls common room, University of Southampton



get the benefits of living in the city centre. So it's not so much campus versus city, as looking at what the different halls offer," she says.

"Try to find halls that have flats with lots of people living together," says Will Sawyer, a journalism student at Kingston University London. "It means you'll have a big kitchen and there will always be someone to talk to." Shared accommodation can also save you money, Burns points out.

At the top end of the market, private sector accommodation has become more commonplace. "There are some very high-quality private halls out there nowadays," Bell says, "but do check what you're signing up for and the length of the contract." What will happen if your son or daughter has to withdraw

'Flats with lots of people living together will have big kitchens, and there will always be someone to talk to'

Will King Student

from university? "Not all private places will release you from the contract," she says.

Be sure to ask about upfront costs, a spokesperson for the National Union of Students (NUS) says. "A majority of properties in the private rented sector will either have a holding deposit, admin fees, or both," they say.

Living at home is no longer an unusual choice for students. Research from the Sutton Trust shows that the number of "commuter students" has grown over recent years. Yousef El-T is studying medicine at King's College London and lives at home. "I'm quite lucky to be honest," he says. "A lot of my friends are doing the same. I sometimes even meet my friends on the tube going home. People just think it's normal."

Whichever option your son or daughter is leaning towards, parents can help with research. Burns says parents are invaluable when it comes to "things like reading the small print, which some 17-18 year olds are less inclined to do". If you're asked to be a guarantor, check whether you are liable for just one room, or the whole flat, Bell says. Parents should also make sure students have a realistic idea of their budget and encourage their student son or daughter to look with an open mind. "Our experience is that students all have a good time in halls, even if they don't get exactly [the place] they want," she says.

Ultimately, students should take a lead role in managing their accommodation. And for worried parents who've not heard from their children, university-owned halls, have an extra appeal. "We can go and knock on the door and ask students to ring their mum or dad," Bell says. "Often they've just been having too much fun and forgotten to call."

The new home dynamic

A commuter student's guide

Do some research

Commuter students should contact the university early on to find out what support is available to them. Many universities will have networks or societies that are specifically for students living at home. Parents should encourage their children to consider joining up.

Set some ground rules

You may need to sit down and negotiate how the new arrangement will work. Perhaps your son or daughter will agree to contribute a certain amount towards rent and bills, and cook once a week, in return for more space?

Have two-way discussions

Parental support at this time is invaluable, but it is also a time for students to start taking on more responsibility. It will help if students contribute their own ideas for making the living arrangement work.

Expect lifestyle changes

Parents need to be mindful that university is not just a school for older people, says Paul Burns, accommodation office manager at the University of Manchester. There are different schedules and pressures. For example, students may have days without lectures, but that doesn't mean they are not still working.

Allow space to study

Finding a good space to study can be tricky for commuter students. If there is a quiet area of the house, perhaps that could be transformed into a study room. Alternatively, your son or daughter could stick around to study on-campus, or go to a local library or cafe.

Encourage them to get out

Yousef El-T says his biggest tip for commuter students is to get involved in everything. There are lots of benefits to living at home - such as cheaper rent and parental support when the academic pressure kicks in - but with further to travel, commuter students can also miss out on the more sociable aspects of university. To avoid that, encourage them to be involved, but without pushing them away. **AY-P**

Experience

'We clean and Hoover together, we put music on and have a laugh'

Psychology student Becky Kenderdine on her life in student halls at the University of Birmingham

Interview by Abby Young-Powell

When I first moved into student halls I was nervous and excited. I was nervous about what the people I was going to be living with would be like. But I was also excited about moving in with young people for the first time.

I live with four others and we were the last flat to arrive. Everyone else

got there on Saturday, but we didn't move in until Sunday, so it was a bit daunting. Our flat is on the top floor of our block and I remember thinking: "Oh my god, I have to walk up all these stairs."

My housemates got there at the same time. Our parents wanted to hang around, but we secretly tried to get rid of them, so we could get to know each other without them there.

When they eventually left, we all unpacked and went to chat in the kitchen. There's the perfect amount of storage space - one cupboard and one shelf each.

My room is so nice. I have a desk and enough wardrobe space. I brought photos of my friends from home and put them on my walls; then, as the year has gone by, I've put up photos of my uni friends as well.

Since living in halls, I've learned to cook simple things, like pasta bakes and stir fries. We clean on Sundays and do the hoovering. We all do it together, because it's more sociable and fun that way. We just put music on and have a laugh.

Living in halls has made me realise how expensive some stuff, like loo roll, is. Things also get dirty quickly, but as long as you've got a cleaning rota it's OK.

My tips for other students would be to learn how to cook a few meals before you go. I bought a cookbook, for example.

Definitely try to do things with your flatmates and take advantage of freshers' week. Some of the people you meet then can become friends that you have for life. And everyone's in the same situation, so you bond really quickly.

Now when I go back home, I appreciate things more. When your mum's making all your meals you don't realise how long things take. Like a roast dinner actually takes a lot of preparation. And cleaning takes a few hours. I didn't realise before, but now I appreciate it.

'Our parents wanted to hang around, but we tried to get rid of them, so we could get to know each other'



► Becky Kenderdine in her university flatshare bedroom
PHOTOGRAPH: JONATHAN CHERRY FOR THE GUARDIAN

Respect, consideration, dishes

How to be a good housemate

Your new housemates could become friends for life, or they could drive you crazy. Or perhaps a bit of both. Either way, you'll want to get on with the people you live with as much as possible. So, how can you be a good housemate?

Reach out

Everyone has their quirks, but if you get to know and like your housemates, any odd habits matter less. So put in the effort to really get to know who you're living with and to do things with them outside of the house, says Chiara Fiorillo,

who studies at City, University of London: "Try going for a walk, or eating at a restaurant together."

Respect people's space

There's a delicate balance between being sociable and harassing people. "It's a matter of being friendly but also respectful," says Fiorillo. "You don't want to invade other people's privacy, especially if they're doing exams or something."

You're the adults of the house now - so act like it

Being an adult means doing your

own dishes and not throwing a noisy party in the house without telling anyone. "In your own room you can do whatever you want," says Fiorillo. "But if there's a shared toilet or kitchen, it's very important to respect common spaces."

Forgive others' mistakes

For many, student halls is their first taste of living away from home. And your housemates - and you - will probably make mistakes. "When you're at uni you've got one foot in the adult world and one in education," says Jak Malone, who's

studying at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. "People are still learning and adjusting, so be considerate that not everyone's going to get it right straight away."

Don't talk behind people's backs

There's nothing worse than going home to tension or a bad atmosphere, and it's easily avoided with communication and compassion. "We promised to always look after each other," says Malone. "We said, if somebody leaves a mess, let's not complain among ourselves. Let's go straight

to the person and not ostracise anybody," he says.

Chip in and help out

A good housemate won't shy away from taking the bins out. "They'll help clean and buy things like milk and bin liners and stuff like that," says Becky Kenderdine (see above). And a really great housemate might even go the extra mile and buy treats for everyone. "We think nothing of nipping into a shop and buying sweets for each other," says Malone. "It's a really nice atmosphere." **AY-P**

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Welfare at university

For students who feel under pressure, help is at hand

Expectations and big debts can weigh heavy on students - but counselling and other facilities are commonplace

Rachel Hall

University suicide epidemic; student mental health crisis - these terms are rarely far from the headlines. And the evidence that backs them up is concerning. An Institute for Public Policy Research report last year showed that five times as many students as 10 years ago are reporting mental health conditions to their universities, while student suicides have risen from 75 in 2007 to 134 in 2015. These figures do not make easy reading for parents sending their children off to university for the first time.

'Parents need to learn how to be supportive in a non-judgmental, non-pressured way'

Poppy Brown
Psychology PhD student

The rise in mental health problems is often attributed to the increasing pressure and stress associated with university, according to psychology PhD student Poppy Brown, who authored a report on improving student mental health for the Higher Education Policy Institute while studying for her undergraduate degree.

"It's not quite how it used to be, when going to university was an achievement in itself," she says. "Now you have to get a 2:1, and at top universities you have to get a first, and then you have to get a job immediately when you graduate. It's not possible to take time off - you need to pay off all the debt."

Although mental health problems like anxiety and depression are undoubtedly rising among university students, concerned parents should treat some of the media coverage with a degree of scepticism. It's true that mental health tends to dip at university, but then it's also the case that graduates report better mental health than their non-graduate peers. Rather than worry, parents can inform themselves on mental health issues so they can help signpost available resources if the need arises.

Ultimately, however, children have to learn independence and resilience by themselves, and the university years are an obvious time to start. Parents also need to learn to let go a little at this point. They can't,



▲ Wellbeing advisers will be on hand if you need a sympathetic ear
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

for example, expect the university to disclose any information on how their offspring is doing. "It's a case of parents learning how to be supportive in a non-judgmental, non-pressured way, which might be a different role to when children were younger and needed more active care," says Brown.

Knowing that their child will have access to a wide range of mental health provision at their university should help allay any fears.

According to Peter Eldrid, the deputy head of counselling at Brunel University, students often have better access to support and facilities, via their university, than other members of the local community.

Most universities now have counselling services, alongside mental health and wellbeing advisers, many of whom are specialised in supporting students through the transition from school to university. Students' unions are also on hand to help with basic life advice, from accommodation

Look after yourself

Mental health awareness at university

Find a mentor

Most universities have a mentoring or buddy scheme, pairing freshers with an older peer. They can help ease the transition from school to university, give advice on essential life skills, and signpost mental health support.

Talk to someone

As well as counselling services run by the NHS and in-house at universities, there are a number of helplines run by charities, including Mind, Nightline and Samaritans. You can contact any of these whenever you need to, however big or small you think your problem is.

Tell your doctor

If you have a pre-existing condition, flag up the move with your mental health services provider long before leaving for university, to ensure continuity of care. Explore the options in your new town - ringing your university or students' union is a good place to start.

Turn to your tutor

If you're struggling with your course, talk to your tutor. Increasingly, many will have received mental health training; even if not, they're your first point of contact. **RH**

support to cooking advice and signposting university facilities.

Moving from school to university can make it difficult to look after general wellbeing, such as sleeping well, moderating alcohol use, and eating healthily. Equally, the shift in academic pressures and workload can be particularly stressful. Eldrid observes perennial themes among new students' concerns: "Am I doing this right? Am I good enough? Am I going to be able to survive the course? Will my grades be OK? Will I make friends? Will I fit in? Will I be OK?"

Most institutions offer additional support for the transition, including mentoring schemes. "Mentors can help answer those things that students are often too embarrassed to ask us about," says Eldrid. "If there are more serious issues, then they can help direct new students to where they can get help."

For students with pre-existing mental health problems, one of the biggest challenges can be the transition from child and adolescent services in their home town to adult services in their university town. Louise Honey, a programme development manager at the Student Minds charity, says students should give their home practice as much notice of their move as possible. They should also ensure they have enough of their medication (where applicable) to see them through even the bumpiest of transitions.

To put their minds at ease, students and parents can contact their future university in advance to explore their support options, whether counselling or NHS services, at any point. "Most universities would welcome contact from a parent or student in relation to what they might benefit from or need, including making any adjustment to ensure a student isn't left wondering how to get help," says Eldrid.

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123, or by emailing jo@samaritans.org. You can contact the mental health charity Mind by calling 0300 123 3393 or visiting mind.org.uk



'Speak to current students, to get personal opinions on the student life and atmosphere'

Kristen Shorey
Psychology student

Experience

'I have friends whose children dropped out in their first years'

Karen Packham and her daughter went on numerous open days before settling on a university that felt right

Interview by Lucy Jolin

For Karen Packham, going to open days with her daughter, Kristen Shorey, wasn't just an information-gathering exercise, but a chance to bond. "We didn't know Newcastle or Liverpool, so we explored the cities in the evening," she says. "When you have more than one child, you don't often get the opportunity to spend time with just one!"

They certainly had plenty of opportunities: Shorey attended general open days at several universities, including Cardiff and

Sussex, and specific offer-holder days at Newcastle and Liverpool, among others, normally with a parent accompanying her. She's now at the University of Reading, in her first year of studying psychology.

Picking a university is tough, and both Packham and Shorey say open days were a great way to narrow down options. "While some of the places were in lovely locations, I realised the courses themselves weren't for me, or alternatively I found I didn't like the location," says Shorey. "So I'd definitely recommend visiting the open days for a broader perspective. You can collect leaflets, to compare information with other universities later on, which saves you having to write everything down on the day. It's also useful to speak to current students, to get personal opinions on the student life and atmosphere."

Packham asked questions that drew on her experience. "I asked

the open-ended questions, such as what it would feel like to live away in this particular town, or on that kind of campus. I have friends whose children dropped out in their first years, and often the reason was because they didn't enjoy living in the combination of campus and town they'd ended up in."

Shorey says she asked her parents to come for guidance and support while travelling around new cities she hadn't been to before. "They supported me by offering advice on what I should be looking for - such as accommodation, student support, extracurricular and student life - as well as asking all the important questions I had forgotten to ask."

Although, Packham says, her own parents didn't get involved in any of her university open days, she thinks things are different now. "They'd never been to university and it just didn't even occur to me to involve them! In an ideal world, I wish our children could do this stuff on their own like we used to. But the pressure of knowing they are going to have this massive loan makes the decision so much more important for them. I try to be a touch point for them - a person who is slightly removed from it and who might pick up on things they didn't spot."

▲ Kristen Shorey and her mother, Karen Packham, used open days as a bonding experience

PHOTOGRAPH: ELLIOT SHEPPARD FOR THE GUARDIAN

Everything you always wanted to know about X

Open days give you the chance to ask students and tutors all about life at a university - and do some solo exploring too

Lucy Jolin

Attending open days is time consuming and expensive - so parents and children alike will want to come away with a clear idea of whether the universities they visit are going to be a good match. "It's a good idea to have somebody else with you on the day, whether it's parents, a friend or a partner," says Carole McCann, head of student recruitment at the University of Law. "The better they know you personally, the more insight they can provide as to whether they can see you living and studying at that university. They're also a good grounding influence in case you get caught up in the excitement of the day and forget about some of the things you wanted to find out about."

Preparation is key, so pre-book train tickets and accommodation and find out about the day's agenda. "We provide a guide for the day that can be accessed beforehand, so a lot of our prospective students

▼ Student ambassadors at an open day at the University of Reading

'You will get a gut feeling about a place that you won't get from looking online or reading about it'

Mandy Pine
Development manager



come with the day all planned out," says Emily Oliver, a third-year early childhood studies student at the University of Derby, who presents at the University's Welcome Talks. "Write any questions down beforehand - we'll always point you in the right direction to get the best answer or support."

Dipisha Patel, events coordinator at the University of Wolverhampton, advises students and parents to ask specific questions about potential courses, including how graduates fare: "As well as the all-important questions about the course content, it's good to find out about employment rates and the sorts of careers graduates enter." The universities will all present their best side, so try to get a reality check by talking to current students. "Ask the student volunteers about their experiences of getting accommodation," says Abbie Hettle, who graduated from the University of York in January 2018. "I remember the mad rush applying for my first halls of residence - they were hugely

oversubscribed. I think having approachable students there is great, so you can ask all the dumb stuff, like where you do laundry, and does the kitchen get cleaned?"

Open days can feel hectic, so make sure you build in some time to just get a feel for both the campus and the city. "Enjoy the day," says Mandy Pine, development manager at Nottingham Trent University. "Absorb the atmosphere. You will get a gut feeling about each place you visit that you won't get from looking online or reading about it. That's why it is so important to visit in person."

It can be tough for parents to defer to their children's opinions, but it's essential, says Oliver. "Let your child make the calls, support them in their questions and act as more of a guide than a leader," says Oliver. "Obviously, it's important that parents get their own questions answered too, but it's the prospective student who will be spending the next three-plus years at the university."

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◀ *On the flight path: the university years signal a big change for all parties*

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Experience **'I could always hop on a train and see them'**

Bernadette Moore has seen her three children go off to university, but it was their gap years that proved the sternest tests

Interview by **Kim Thomas**

Last October, the youngest of Bernadette Moore's three children, Angus, left home to study history at the University of Nottingham. When the older two, now 27 and 23, had left home, it felt hard, because they took gap years in south-east Asia, which meant long periods without contact. University was easier. "It wasn't too bad, because I could always hop on a train and see them, and I was able to call them much more regularly."

With Angus gone, Moore finally had an empty nest and some time to herself. "I've worked freelance since when my children were little and I have devoted my life to bringing them up," she says. "Everyone was saying: 'What are you going to do when Angus leaves? You are going to be bereft.'" But although she dreaded it initially, when the time arrived, she found herself ready: "It was a big wrench but I really did enjoy the freedom. I wasn't sitting around crying."

To make sure it didn't hit her too hard, Moore made sure she was always out of the house doing something at

4.30, the time Angus normally came home from school, and they've stayed in touch with weekly phone calls. She has also kept herself busy - with a part-time psychotherapy course, which she had already started by the time Angus left, and organising an art exhibition, which involved travelling from her home in London to Manchester.

The empty nest finally gave her the opportunity to travel as well. "I went

to visit family all over the UK, and I went to see family in France. I honestly did enjoy my new freedom, because I'd had a child in the school system for 25 years."

On reflection, she says, the anticipation "is far worse than the reality. It's not that bad at all." Her advice to parents contemplating an empty nest is to "have things lined up, so you can get on and do them when they've actually gone rather than sitting round thinking: 'What am I going to do now?'" Having spent anxious hours worrying that her children haven't returned her calls, she also cautions: "Don't worry if they don't ring you back. No news is good news."

Moore is very grateful for the years she spent looking after her children. But she is also very positive about what comes afterwards: "I have enjoyed this new stage of my life, and once you get used to it, it's quite liberating."

'I'd had a child in the school system for 25 years. I honestly did enjoy my new freedom'

Empty nests

'See the positives, revisit old interests'

For some parents, the void left by children going to university is harrowing; others see it as an opportunity

Kim Thomas

Louise Rodgers's two children, 25 and 24, flew the nest several years ago - but they've come back at various times too. "Going to university is the first part of their journey to independence, and that can go on for quite a while these days," she says. "It's been several years of coming and going in a really lovely, delightful way, most of the time."

Rodgers takes a dim view of empty nest syndrome. "I feel it's a little bit of a hark back to when women defined themselves by their status as mothers and wives. And I feel that we all have more complex identities than that now - mother is just one of them."

Not everyone feels the same way. Celia Dodd, author of *The Empty Nest*, says that for many parents it can be a wrench when children leave for university. Even when younger siblings remain, parents can feel a sense of loss. "I've got three and when each one went it was very painful," she says.

"It's a person you're missing, not a concept. It doesn't matter if you've

got 14 children or one child, that's the essence."

The process of coming to terms with an empty nest can take time, says Dodd. "The first couple of weeks are hard, and it's good to do things to cheer yourself up. Try not to constantly ring your child but to think about things you really like doing, because you gradually find out the nice things - that you don't have to be in two places at once, and you can go for a drink after work, and you can meet your friends." She suggests keeping a list of enjoyable activities, such as reading a good book, or going for a swim, that you can do when you're feeling low.

You may be tempted to become involved in your child's new life by monitoring them on social media, but Dodd's advice is to steer clear. "I don't think it's helpful - you need to wean yourself off. You've got to get on without them and you've got to let them get on without you as well. They will need your support for a long time but, to some extent, you should try not to badger them."

'The first couple of weeks are hard, and it's good to do think about things you really like doing'

Celia Dodd
Author, *The Empty Nest*

Some parents, can become "very depressed", says Sandy Wolfson, director of programmes, postgraduate psychology, at Northumbria University, and feel as though they no longer have a sense of purpose. "It's very important for people in that situation to see the positives - that finally you can revisit some of the interests that you had years ago but put aside when you were raising your children," she says.

Rodgers agrees. A friend saw the empty nest as an opportunity to throw herself into work, leading to a "magnificent promotion". She herself chose another route, selling the PR company she ran and retraining as a business and personal coach. "It's not so much about filling the gap as giving space to other things that you haven't had time to do or to think about or to experience," she says.

Wolfson suggests it's a good time to think about returning to study yourself. That could be anything from a short local adult education class to a full degree - what better time to take a course in a subject you've always loved than when you finally have time to yourself?

For couples, this can be an opportunity to re-evaluate a relationship. Parents are often so used to relating to each other through their children that it's very common for marriages to break down at this stage. On the other hand, Dodd says, research shows many couple relationships improve when the children leave "because you have more quality time and you can think about each other and focus on each other".

So it's not all doom and gloom. Ultimately, says Dodd, you form a different, more adult relationship with your grown-up children. As Rodgers says of her own experience: "What greater pleasure than to see young people mature and do what they were always supposed to do, which is flee the nest? It's what we should be preparing for."

▶ *Bernadette Moore filled her extra time by setting up an art exhibition and studying psychotherapy*



Loans, grants and bursaries - how uni funding stacks up

What students pay, and the funding support they can get, varies across the UK

Lucy Jolin

University is a big investment - so it's important to know exactly what's available to help with the bill. Prospective full-time students living in England have to pay tuition fees, which are paid directly to your university. To cover the cost of these, students are eligible for a tuition fee loan. Students can also apply for a maintenance loan, which is paid directly to them, and can be used for living costs. How much they get depends on where they're living - at home with parents or away - and

where they will be studying: London-based students are eligible for more. The maximum for a student living away from home outside London during the 2017-18 academic year, for example, is £8,430. Neither loan will start being repaid until the course has finished and the student is earning £25,000 a year. Students who have lived in Scotland for three years before their course starts can go to university in Scotland without paying any tuition fees. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) pays this (£1,820). However, Scottish students wishing to study in England, Wales or Northern Ireland still need to pay the full tuition fees. They'll need to apply to the SAAS for a loan to cover this, as well as for a maintenance loan of up to £5,750. Students under 25 can also apply for a young students' bursary of up to £1,875 - which doesn't have to be paid back. The amount they are eligible for depends on parents' household income.



◀ Keep a close watch: money will be tight during your university years
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Money talk University funding facts

- Tuition fees for publicly funded universities can be as high as £9,250 a year in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland and up to £9,000 a year in Wales.
- The Welsh Government Learning Grant is the most generous support package: students could get up to £11,250 a year, and most are eligible for the minimum of £1,000 a year.
- If you live in England or Wales, you won't start repaying your loan until you earn £25,000 a year or more. Students in Scotland or Northern Ireland start paying it back when they earn £18,330 a year.
- £8.39bn in tuition fee loans was paid to 1.03 million full-time students in the academic year 2016-17. LJ
- 14.6 hours per week, earning £96.70 - less than half the average parental contribution of £205.20.
- Cardiff topped the list of the most affordable university cities in NatWest's Student Living Index 2017, followed by Aberdeen, Durham, Canterbury and Swansea.
- The index also found that students work an average of

Students from Wales will also have to pay standard tuition fees wherever they study in the UK; they need to apply to Student Finance Wales for a student loan to cover these. However, Welsh Government Learning Grants (WGLGs) - which don't have to be paid back and are awarded according to where the student will be studying and what their parents' household income is - are now available. Welsh students can apply for a maintenance loan too - also assessed on parental income. Students living in Northern Ireland can apply to Student Finance NI to get tuition fees loans of up to £9,250 for studying in England, Scotland or Wales, and loans of up to £4,030 for studying in Northern Ireland, as tuition fees are cheaper there. They can also apply for a student loan for maintenance. Regardless of where students live, there could be extra help available if they have a disability, if they have children, or if they're a care leaver. Scholarships or bursaries may also be available. Students will be more likely to be eligible for these if they fit particular criteria, such as: having a lower household income; having a disability; excelling in a particular subject, musical instrument or sport; living in a particular region; or being from a particular background. Smaller grants for specific needs, such as travel or childcare, could also be available. The best way to find out about these is to contact individual universities directly.

A working option for funding education

Employment has become a necessity for most students; here's how to make sure the job's a good'un

Abby Young-Powell

Advising your child about work and study can be tricky - both the pressures of university and the world of work have changed drastically over the past two decades. But rising fees and costs have forced more students into working to support themselves. Here's how to help them get the most out of that part-time job. First, match jobs to studies if you can. There's nothing wrong with working behind a bar or in a warehouse, but students



▼ Some students are able to get jobs relevant to their studies
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

should also consider trying to find something that's relevant to their degree subject, or the career they are considering. "At the start of the autumn semester many universities organise their own part-time jobs and volunteering fairs," says Paul Fennell, head of careers and employability at the University of Sheffield. "There, students can meet employers with part-time vacancies in retail, finance, web development, customer service, marketing and more." Second, find a balance. It's generally recommended that students don't work more than 12-16 hours per week if they are studying full-time - any more could adversely affect their studies. Encourage them to think about how they're going to balance these demands, and keep lines of communication

open. "Talk to your prospective student about the importance of staying connected with friends and loved ones," says Priscilla Preston, director of student services at Leeds Beckett University. "Working and studying can feel overwhelming, becoming a barrier to maintaining those ties with others. Yet it's those ties that can help to keep things in perspective if students are feeling lonely or isolated." Also, bear in mind that many universities run their own job search agencies, where jobs are checked for fair rates. There's also usually plenty of work available at the university itself, from working in the student shop to being a student ambassador. "We would always recommend students use their university job searching team as their first port of call when looking for work, as they can advise on local employers who recruit students and also what opportunities to avoid," says Fennell. "If a job sounds too good to be true, it probably is!" Whatever job your child ends up with during their time at university, it's a good idea for them to keep a log of the skills they acquire. Post-university job applications will all be boosted by skills and experience gained while working in those part-time positions - whether that's communication skills learned behind a counter or working as a team when catering for a big event. They'll all come in useful when it comes to compiling a CV.



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(The Sunday Times, 2018)





How to prepare for uni

A few key life lessons to smooth the transition

Brief them on a few simple recipes, cleaning up and time management and your children will be as prepared as you could hope for

Rachel Hall

When you send your kids off to university, it's time to part with all memories of early cooking disasters. Sure, there are likely to still be burned crusts and soggy bottoms in the future, but from now on, those are all part of the learning process.

That's not to say there aren't things you can do to ensure your children are as prepared as possible. Here's your pre-university checklist for everything you can do to help.

Let's kick off with cooking. Starting off with a regular supervised meal slot in the family calendar can be helpful. You should take a back seat, but be there to turn down the heat when the vegetables are burning, and to explain why that's happening. Dispatching them with a recipe book of family favourites with easy-to-follow explanations can also be comforting. If you can afford it, consider doing

it, it's worth thinking about what a reasonable level of support might look like, and outlining that in advance, rather than supplementing with handouts. Either way, university is about learning to live on a tight budget. Remember that budgeting for an individual may cost more than an individual who is part of a family, since they will lose out on economies of scale.

Time management can be a big challenge for children who have never lived away from their parents for any length of time. Students suddenly lurch from days that were highly structured - waking up to go to school, doing homework, eating meals with the family, lights off at a certain time - into a much freer arrangement, with only themselves to police it. They need to self-motivate to attend lectures and do coursework, cook their own meals, and turn in on time. Teach them the benefits of a routine, even if it's a loose one. Emphasise the connection between eight hours of high-quality sleep and good mental health, and how to structure their workload and manage stress.

Lastly, teach them to look after themselves. Adjusting to university and independent life isn't just about the practical details. It's also about learning that you're in control of all aspects of your life - including your health. Have an open, realistic conversation with your child about alcohol and drugs, and the connection between abuse and poor mental health. Remind them that it's normal to feel anxious or lonely, and that settling in will take time. Check out the wellbeing support on offer at the university, and make sure your student child knows how to access it. The first term is long, so an offer to pay for your child to come home for a weekend is a good idea, whether they take you up on it or not.

▲ Students who have cooked for themselves will have the edge in self-catered halls

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

'We made sure he had a larder of food, but accepted he would soon be eating pot noodles and pizza'

Andy Topps
Father

Experience

'I contacted him more than he contacted me'

Andy Potts let his son, Harry, get on with choosing a university - and funding it - but was on hand for the emergencies that never came

Interview by Rachel Hall

It was very much Harry's decision to go to university at all. He said: "I want to go." And I said: "Are you sure, because ultimately it's a big part of your life, it's going to cost a lot of money, and you're going to have to fund it yourself. I'm not in a situation or willing to be able to fund it."

We went to an open day at Northumbria University in Newcastle. We sat in a lecture, and looked around some of the accommodation and the library. He did look at other universities, but he was pretty keen on going to live in Newcastle.

I said to him: "If you need any help with the application just let me know." But he pretty much did it himself - he asked me the odd question. Northumbria was his first choice and he got it.

I took him up on the day. We had a car full of stuff, and I think we'd thought of quite a lot of things. We gave him a box with cutlery and crockery, but brought back some other things we realised we wouldn't need - other kids had brought pans, for example, so they were doubling up.

We also made sure he at least had a larder full of food at the beginning, although we accepted that after the first few weeks he would probably be eating pot noodles and pizza. We took him to the supermarket, and got him some of the things he wanted, but we also got him vegetables - broccoli and that sort of thing.

We went to the accommodation and met his flatmates. They all seemed like a good bunch. We made sure he knew about things like where the doctors was. We also went to the library, which I thought was brilliant. I just walked around and thought: "I could work in here." It seemed a really great space.

I told Harry that he should contact me whenever he needed me, but I also said I didn't want to go three weeks without hearing from him. As it turns out, I probably contacted him more than he contacted me, just to check in and see how it was all going. We went up in the first term, then my wife and I went up in January, and went out around Newcastle and met his new friends.

I think he felt fairly well prepared, and when I left he seemed pretty chilled. I didn't really feel he needed me to be around, actually.

I think there's a pretty good support structure if you do need help, but I think he slotted in fairly well and felt pretty comfortable being there.



▶ Andy Potts felt that his son adjusted quickly to university life

Studying abroad Hungry for adventure? Here's a sensible choice

With lower fees and courses taught in English, non-UK unis are a smart option

Abby Young-Powell

It can be tough when your son or daughter moves away to university. And that challenge is only amplified if they're going to another country. In fact, the whole process can be more stressful for parents than students, says Anna Moscrop, study abroad manager at the University of Exeter. But having a student child go abroad needn't be filled with worry. Students are increasingly keen to jet off for a degree or a semester. Some can't resist an adventure, the chance to explore a new culture, or maybe even to soak up a bit more sunshine. For others, cost is the deciding factor; many European countries charge much less than

the UK's annual £9,000-plus tuition fees. Many young people also think that spending time abroad will improve their career prospects, a British Council study found. British students can study in many places around the world, with many packing their bags



▲ Erasmus students get to enjoy a placement of months or a year abroad
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

for destinations across English-speaking nations such as the US, Canada or Australia. On top of this, the number of courses taught in English in Europe is growing. International students can study in Germany or Norway for free. In France, average annual tuition fees are just £160 for most undergraduate programmes, while in Spain, the average cost is £577-£1,086 per year. Tuition fees in the US and Australia are higher - and both countries require a student visa - but scholarship options are available to international students.

With so much choice, parents will want to help students research destinations and cost. Rob Randall, a student who studied in Florida, says he was "very grateful" his dad

'Don't get distracted by the big poster attractions. You've got to look at the whole experience'

Rob Randall
Student

helped him to do some research. And that research will be valuable to parents in the months to come. "You'll be more able to understand that they will cope," says Katrien Verbruggen, a study abroad manager at the University of East Anglia.

If studying full-time for a degree abroad seems like too much of a leap of faith for your son or daughter - and, perhaps, you - then the Erasmus programme may be of interest. Erasmus placements to Europe and beyond last for between two and 12 months, usually during a student's second or third year. Organised through British universities, these placements provide students with a grant; the amount they get is dependent upon the destination.

The scope of Erasmus placements available to a student depends on their British university's links to universities abroad - information that is normally available on their website. Students should consider the cost of different destinations and

look into the course they would be studying. "Don't get too distracted by the big poster attractions," says Randall. "You've got to look at the whole university experience, like the course and accommodation."

If your son or daughter is about to jet off, there are many ways to keep in touch. "We organised weekly Skype sessions," says Randall, "and our family WhatsApp group was a nice reminder of life back home." And don't panic if they experience homesickness - culture shock is normal, says Moscrop. Support is in place at most foreign universities and young people often cope better than you expect them to, she adds.

Daniel Baker studied for his degree in Paris. He says parents tend to "overestimate rebelliousness and underestimate life skills". If there's a problem it will most likely just be getting lost, locked out, or losing something, he says.

Although the experience may be nerve-racking, most students appreciate the benefits of studying abroad, says Naquita Lewis, higher education lead for Erasmus+ at the British Council. "They become stronger, more self-confident, self-aware, mature, and develop great life skills," she says.

Kim O'Rourke says she has noticed a "huge difference" in her son, Conor, who studies at Cardiff Metropolitan University, but went to the US for a summer last year. "He's broadened his horizons. It has been fantastic to see."



◀ Robert Thomas and his daughter, Lowri, on Penarth pier
PHOTOGRAPH: GARETH PHILLIPS FOR THE GUARDIAN

'She uses Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook so I get a good picture of what she's doing'

Experience 'New York is a long way. She was very nervous, naturally'

Robert Thomas, who lives in Penarth, Wales, tells us how he felt when his daughter, Lowri, went to study Arabic at Columbia University

Interview by Abby Young-Powell

When Lowri first told me she wanted to study at Columbia University I didn't know where it was. Then when she told me it was in New York I thought: "Uh oh". But it's a different place to when my wife and I went there 20 years ago; it's much safer now. When Lowri left last August, I

went to America with her brother and mum to say goodbye. That made all the difference. We helped her to move into her halls of residence and it was brilliantly organised. There were buses to take parents to shops to buy things like bedding.

On the last day we said goodbye, but it wasn't until I got home that it really hit me. I opened the fridge to get some milk for my tea and saw an unopened box of olives. She loves olives and that's when it hit me that she wouldn't be eating them. I had a cry then.

Columbia had an introductory session for parents and it helped so much. Even before she went, they wrote to us as her parents and effectively said: "We know you'll be worried about her but don't be - we'll look after her." And that is so reassuring. She was very nervous, naturally.

It's a long way from home. She can't bring her washing home at the weekend. If she's feeling a bit homesick she can't pop back for a bowl of cawl. But there's a thriving Welsh community in New York and there are some Welsh societies and she's met people there.

The great thing about modern technology is you can keep in touch in a myriad of ways. Being able to actually see the person you're talking to on a video call - that's very reassuring. But she uses the whole range of social media - Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook. So you get a very comprehensive picture of what she's doing.

I think it's an extraordinary opportunity she has. The education she's getting is Ivy league and as an international student she's met people from all over the world. She's become very independent. For example, she's planning to go to San Francisco with her friend.

I think my main advice for other parents is to do as much research as you can before they go away. You can talk to people, find out about the teachers and even see who goes to the university - all before they go.

Beyond Britain Tips for studying abroad

Whether they're jetting off to sun-soaked Barcelona, or preparing to hit the beach in Sydney, your child is sure to be excited about the adventure that awaits. The parent's role here is clear: to make sure none of the practical necessities get forgotten in the maelstrom of anticipation. Here's a few pointers:

● **Travel and health insurance**
For countries like America, Australia and New Zealand, you'll need to take out the host university health insurance if you want to get a student visa. If you're in Europe, a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) will cover you for emergencies and temporary stays, but you may still need to get insurance as well.

● **Visas**
Read through all the information the host university sends about visas and make sure your child does too, says Anna Moscrop, study abroad manager at the University of Exeter, so everyone is clear about what needs to be done.

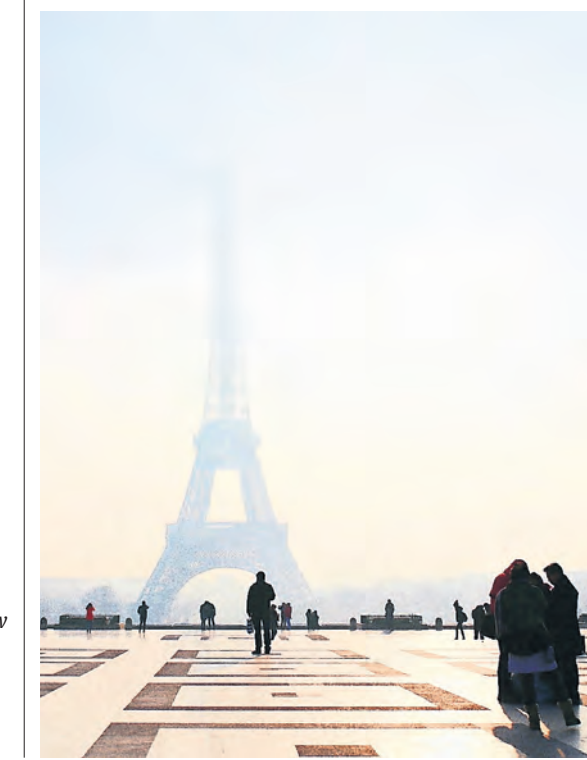
● **Know what to do in an emergency**
Check where the nearest embassy will be and put emergency phone numbers into your phone. Doing this in advance can be invaluable if you run into problems when you're abroad, says Moscrop.

● **Photocopy everything**
It's a good idea to photocopy all of your important documents, including your passport. And if you need ID for a night out, don't take your passport, says Daniel Baker, a student in Paris: "If you lose your driving licence, you can't drive abroad, but if you lose your passport, you can't leave."

● **Sort out your money**
TransferWise and the Post Office have international travel cards, but Baker says the best tactic is to open a local bank account and use TransferWise to add money. "This will help if you want to work abroad too," he says.

● **Learn a few local phrases**
Know your "hola" from your "hallo", even if your course will be in English, says Baker: "In my experience, trying to speak the local language can make all the difference." Download apps like Duolingo or Babbel to help.

● **Pack lightly and with good bags**
Get your suitcases shipped to your new address, Baker says: "You'll be figuring out a new public transportation system and being overloaded with luggage will make it harder." Also, invest in a sturdy satchel that clips closed. "These are easier than rucksacks to keep an eye on when you're on packed public transport," Baker adds.



▶ Tour tips: a few local phrases can make all the difference
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

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