



The TU Guide to: Starting University

Updated for 2021



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Introduction



Starting university this year? From preparing for your first lecture to meeting new people, the **TU Guide to Starting University** has you covered.

Beginning university is an equally daunting and thrilling experience. Whether you're studying close to home or moving to another part of the world, attending a university with close friends or going it alone, there's nothing that can quite prepare you for those first days in student accommodation and in university lectures. It can take some people several weeks to adjust fully to the student lifestyle, with its late nights, raucous antics and feeling of independence, but it's important not to feel overwhelmed. Fortunately for you, we're here to help.

Our team of current students and recent graduates are here to share their invaluable tips for making the most out of your first semester at university, guiding you through those tricky early lectures and awkward social encounters.

If the information in this guide proves helpful in any way, or you'd like to write about your own experiences of starting university for us, don't hesitate to get in touch. Find us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and share your stories. We look forward to hearing from you, and hope you have a fantastic first year at university.



How to prepare academically for the start of university



*Studying at undergraduate level can be a big step up from school, so it's important to hit the ground running. **Charlotte Stevenson** shares her tips for preparing for the first lecture of the year.*

After receiving your exam results and confirming your place at university, you might be wondering what to do next. While it's possible to start chatting to other first years online and make plans for nights out in your first week, the academic side of university is often harder to prepare for.

What will your lectures, seminars and tutorials at university actually be like? What do you need to know before you arrive? Use these last weeks of the summer to find out the answers to these questions and ground yourself in the foundational knowledge you're going to need if you don't want to become too overwhelmed in the first few weeks.

Here are some ways to get in the right frame of mind.

What do you need to know before you arrive?



Find people who can answer any questions you have

If there are any open days being organised by your university before classes start, these will be an opportunity to ask questions about your degree and the teaching in person. If this isn't something you're able to do, you can always email the university instead, asking for information on what topics you'll be studying and how they would like you to prepare.

It's also a good idea to find the university's page on The Student Room or other online forums, as older students should be able to answer your questions and inform you about their own experiences.



See if you can get hold of the reading lists already

Last year, I emailed my lecturers before the year started and was able to get one of them to send me a copy of the reading lists for the upcoming classes. If your university doesn't provide these in advance already, I'd highly recommend doing this. It meant I could get a lot of the books I needed second-hand before other students bought them all, which saved me money. It also helps you get an idea of what the workload will be like for the year.

When it comes to reading through your new books, start with the longer or more complex books. They might look scary, but getting them started while you have time to work gradually will make them much easier to complete in the long run.

Stock up on supplies

There is nothing worse than being interrupted by something completely avoidable such as a pen running out of ink or your computer memory being full. For this reason, it is important to make sure you have extra supplies and working equipment right from the beginning.

You don't have to have a top brand computer or the finest fountain pen, but you do need to make sure that you have enough to last you for at least the first few months at university. Researching in advance can be useful.

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While working your way through the reading list, keep a daily record of the questions and ideas you come up with



Practice your time management

Doing well at university is largely down to how responsibly you can manage your time in order to use it most efficiently. The secret to this is successful scheduling.

A useful way to practice this over the summer is by prioritising your weekly activities and then putting them into a daily context so you can see when you need to be doing what. By practicing this, you'll soon see how you can structure days into discrete blocks of time, which will be useful when you need to find time for revision ahead of exams.

Start thinking about questions and discussion points

One of the most important things you can do before university starts is get in the university mindset and start thinking outside of the box. This will help you develop your own voice so you can better enunciate your thoughts articulately when you're sat in lectures and tutorials.

While working your way through the reading list, keep a daily record of the questions and ideas you come up with. These will prove useful once classes begin as you'll have a head-start on what you want to discuss and maybe even focus on for your assignments.

Continue to enjoy your subject

It is easy to forget why you are passionate about a subject once there are assignments and textbooks to deal with. The most important thing you can achieve is maintaining that love of your field so that what you contribute to the global conversation really is your best work.

Whether it be creating yourself an extra fun reading list that focuses on your favorite areas of interest or attending extra lectures in your nearby area, make sure you're finding ways to keep yourself motivated and engaged with what you are heading to university to study.

What to pack for university



Can't fit all your worldly possessions into your suitcase? **Katie Roach** is here to tell you what's essential and what you can leave at home.

Results day has been and gone, so the next challenge before your time at university starts is to pack. I know from experience how tricky it is to know what you're going to need at university, especially if it's unclear what will be provided by your halls or accommodation. If you need a hand figuring out what belongs in your suitcase and what doesn't, here's a rundown of some of the things I found to be essential when starting university.

Firstly, save space by only packing your 'winter' wardrobe

I thought I would need to bring everything I owned to university, but you really only need to bring clothes for autumn/winter if you'll be spending Christmas at home. Then, after Christmas, you can bring the spring/ summer clothes. Bringing it all at once just means you'll have no wardrobe space and your room will become extremely cluttered really easily.

Make sure to bring coat hangers with you. This is key as most halls don't provide many, if any at all.

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Don't forget your ID and university documents

When you enrol, the university may ask for things like your passport, other forms of ID, your acceptance letter, and other uni documentation. I suggest you file them away in one folder that you can easily get to when you move in. You can add any new documentation you receive when you arrive (such as login details and passwords for the university system or the new Netflix account you proudly buy with your student loan!).

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What to take for the kitchen

If you're in catered halls, then this list of kitchen essentials may not be necessary, but from my experience of self-catered halls, here's a list of the things I found to be super useful:

Distinctive plates and cutlery: By this, I mean buy ones that can easily be identified as yours. Mine were all red and the cutlery had red handles so I knew exactly which was mine. You want to avoid all having the same cheap white Sainsbury's plate and arguing over who didn't wash up!

Basic cooking accessories: If you're anything like me, I didn't know what a capable cook would need before starting university. While you could try and survive for a year off oven chips and fish fingers, taking basic items like a baking tray, tongs, a fish slice, a wooden spoon, a pot with a lid, a frying pan, some kitchen knives, a pair of kitchen scissors, a measuring jug and, MOST importantly, a colander enables you to cook a wider range of dishes.

I'm not underplaying the importance of the colander by the way. It's not a false stereotype that pasta makes up a substantial proportion of a student's diet. You will need a colander, end of.

Bottle and can openers: It's handy to have these just to avoid attempting to open a can of beans with a knife, like I did once, and slicing your hand open. The bottle opener will come in handy when drinking with your new flatmates too.

Other essentials: Tea towels, bag clips for open bags of crisps or cereal, your own washing up sponge and liquid, and oven gloves are also a must. I actually had oven gloves that looked like proper winter gloves so I could grip my tray of chips better, and they were probably the most useful thing I packed for university.





Toiletries and medication

If you're lucky your parent/guardian may have this covered, as it seems to be a trend that families make care packages for their children to take to university. These often include things like paracetamol, plasters, antiseptic cream, and probably most importantly, cold and flu remedy. Freshers' flu is a very real thing so being stocked up with that is a must. You'll also need everything you use at home such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo etc. but you shouldn't need us to tell you that.



I had an en-suite bathroom at university, so I was lucky in that I could keep my toiletries in there all the time. However, if you're sharing showers, you may want to buy a portable shower bag that hangs up in the shower to make sharing as convenient as possible. If you're sharing, you'll also probably need some slippers to avoid walking on the gross halls' floor barefoot when you go to and from the bathroom.

If you have your own bathroom there are a few other things you'll need. I had a bath mat, and another mat to go around the base of the loo. Also, a loo brush and lots of cleaning products are essential.

Buy the right stationery for your course

While you can buy this once you're at uni, it's still useful to consider what you'll actually need. Depending on your course you'll need different equipment so buy accordingly. You may need to buy course books, but I would recommend being careful and selecting only the ones you really will need. Try to talk to some current students to gauge which are actually useful. I bought so many that I didn't need so do yourself a favour and double check!

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Decorating your room and filling it with your trinkets and knick-knacks is really important to make uni feel homelier

Don't forget to find room for some home comforts

These are the items which won't come to mind immediately but will help you to settle into your uni room very quickly and help if you ever feel a bit homesick. It could be that you pack your favorite mug, a photo album, or maybe some posters you had up in your old room.

Decorating your room and filling it with your trinkets and knick-knacks is really important to make uni feel homelier. Halls' rooms vary but quite a lot are a tad disgusting and plain, so bringing bunting or some succulents can really help to brighten up the place. Look out for uni events such as plant and poster sales as they are a great opportunity to buy everything you'll need to spruce up your room.

Things you don't really need but will make your life easier/more fun

A speaker: You'll be everyone's favorite flatmate if you have a decent speaker for pre-drinks.

A printer: This is more for convenience than anything but it's a lot easier to print that last minute essay if you can do it from the comfort of your room instead of attempting to find a working printer at uni.

A lamp: Your halls will more than likely provide one but they are not always that useful. My halls gave us a small color-changing circular lamp which, while being super cool, was the most impractical thing.

An extension lead: There were definitely not enough plug sockets for me to charge everything I owned so having an extension lead was extremely useful.



What to leave at home

To be honest, you should leave as much at home as you can. The aim is to travel light. This will make moving out of halls and into your second- year house a lot easier. I know from experience that taking pretty much everything from home makes moving out after first year extremely stressful.

Unfortunately, and I know this is difficult to accept, you will have to leave your pet at home (if you have one!) This can be really tough, but remember you'll see them every time you're home over the holidays. It seems people miss their pets more than their family!

Finally, this is a little cheesy but also try to leave your worries at home. Uni is an opportunity to try new things, step out of your comfort zone, and meet lots of new people, so leaving your fears and trepidations at home will make your introduction to university that bit smoother.



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How to manage your money in first year

Not sure how to make your money last? **Belkis Megraoui** shares her advice for keeping on top of your finances.

Keeping track of your spending can be challenging, especially when you're just starting off at university. I will be the first to stick my hand up in the air and say, "I was the absolute worst spender". Seriously, I spent so much money on food, transport, makeup, more food, clothes, shoes and even more food – you get the picture.

But fear not, because right here and right now, I will be sharing some useful advice and easy tips to help you learn to manage your finances and make the most of them as a first-year student.

Have a budget and stick to it

Setting yourself a limit in terms of what you can and can't buy will ensure you don't overstep those money-spending limits. Try to keep a list of your average monthly expenses, how much money you're likely to spend on daily necessities such as food and toiletries, and make a conscious effort not to go overboard with it.

If you find that you're still struggling, personal finance apps are a great way to keep track of your spending. And don't forget to take advantage of all the student discounts you can get as a student – for example, UK students can save a third on rail fares with a 16-25 railcard.

Food is glorious... and expensive



One thing I found myself splashing insane amounts of money on, was food – the ultimate culprit. Takeaways aren't cheap (especially when gorged on regularly), and eating at restaurants certainly isn't inexpensive, so my advice to you would be to try to limit the amount of times you eat out and instead, attempt to cook at home more. You'll be surprised at how much you'll enjoy brushing up on your culinary skills! If you happen to commute to university every day, not to worry – bring a packed lunch with you and save those precious pounds for the more beneficial things that await you in the near and bright future. And whatever you do, never go food shopping when you're hungry...

Resisting the urge to spend the money you have in your pockets can be one of the hardest challenges you'll ever face during the course of your life



Set up your very own 'savings account'

Resisting the urge to spend the money you have in your pockets can be one of the hardest challenges you'll ever face during the course of your life – especially in your first year when the excitement of receiving a bursary is too much to handle. You probably feel rich and like you can buy whatever you please, but if you give in to these impulses you may find yourself having to eat only beans on toast for dinner every night.

You might want to set up a savings account with your bank or take a DIY approach with an old-fashioned piggy bank. Decide in advance upon a set amount to put aside each month and do so at the start of the month, before you can be tempted to spend it.



It might not be very fair of me to suggest you completely ditch going out throughout your first year at university, so luckily there are plenty of things you can do to save money and still be social

Alcohol is expensive – and so are clubbing and socialising

Well, I'm probably not one to speak since I never drink or go clubbing. But that doesn't mean I'm going to deprive anyone of a few words of wisdom on the topic! Let me put it this way for you: Many students in the UK are spending up to £50 or £60 per week on going out – which is at least £200 a month – which equates to a whopping £2,400 per year! And that's just on nights out alone. It might not be very fair of me to suggest you completely ditch going out throughout your first year at university, so luckily there are plenty of things you can do to save money and still be social, such as:

- Leave your debit card at home and only take a limited amount of money with you, that way you won't be able to take out cash and spend even more money while you're out. If you really need your card, only use free ATMs (nightclub ones are notorious for charging you to use them)
- Pre-drink before you leave so you won't need to spend so much on expensive drinks in a nightclub
- Arrive at a club before you have to pay an entry fee, or go somewhere that's free entry all night



And finally, don't get too excited with your initial four-digit bank balance

I heard from a friend once that someone she knew spent all £4,000 of his maintenance loan in one day. How? Well, he bought a car. A nice, shiny new car. If you're reading this, you might have been planning to treat yourself with your brand-new cash but try to remember you need this money for more important things.

How to escape your comfort zone at university



Going to university means opening yourself up to lots of new people and experiences. This can be a nerve-wracking experience, but **Charlotte Stevenson** has some tips which will help.

Arriving at university can be simultaneously the most nerve-wracking and exciting experience, a moment where you leave your comfort zone and begin to try new things and meet lots of new people. The first week of classes is a perfect opportunity to make friendships that will last a lifetime and test your boundaries, but knowing where to start can be tricky.



If you're struggling to adapt to university life, escape your comfort zone and meet new people, here are some ways you can start.

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Attend plenty of freshers/freshmen event

While not all the events put on in these first weeks may be for you, it's important to use these opportunities to socialise and engage with some

friendly faces. Even if something sounds boring or not your thing, going along means you'll have a chance to know your class-mates and the people you'll be living with.

If you're not a party person, don't worry. Not all student events are based around drinking lots of alcohol and going out until late. Keep an eye out for other activities which have been organised at your university. In my first year, I ended up going on a selfie hunt across campus with my housemates, which was a hilarious experience and a great opportunity to build friendships.

Depending on what you're studying, you might have the opportunity to study abroad for a semester or even a year



Find clubs and societies that fit your interests

Whatever your interests and hobbies, I guarantee there will be at least one club or society connected to it at your university.

In addition to societies connected to things you already enjoy doing, a good way to push the limits of your comfort zone is to try something new. This could be something you've always wanted to try but have never done before, such as rock climbing or sign language. The vast range of university societies means it's a fantastic opportunity to try these things and all groups will be used to catering for novices. Rise to the challenge and say yes to something different. You'll be surprised by the result.

Head out and explore your area

No matter how well you know the area your university is in, there is still nothing better than heading out with your friends, a map and the aim to have an adventure. It's a real exercise of trust to let yourself get lost and know you're in charge of working out your way back, and will help you discover parts of your new home apart from the ones you walk past on the way to lectures each day. Often, you'll find the places you discover by accident are the ones which remain the most memorable.

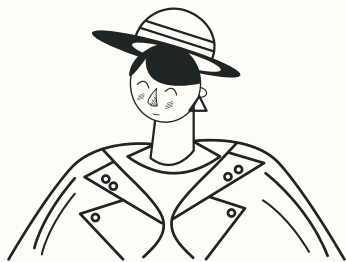
Find out if you can study abroad for a year

Depending on what you're studying, you might have the opportunity to study abroad for a semester or even a year. Normally, this happens in your second year at university, so it's a good idea to find out at the start of first year and start planning. While this is a big leap to make on your own, your university will provide lots of support and the experience will be unforgettable. There'll be lots of other students also going abroad from your university, so you'll be able to share plans and tips with each other in the build-up. If you can't study your course abroad at any point, it's still worth researching the modules and other course options that will be open to you further down the line, so you can plan ahead and push yourself academically.



Ask every question you want to

It can be easy to stay quiet upon arriving at university and let the new people and information you encounter wash over you, but doing so will only make escaping your comfort zone harder in the long run. The beginning of university is the best time to ask the questions that pop into your head, whether it's asking someone in halls where they're from or checking with your tutor what a particular word means. Asking these questions will encourage you to be more communicative and create the opportunities for conversation with people. No question is ever too foolish, so try not to feel nervous.



Don't try and reinvent yourself

Adjusting to university life shouldn't mean you need to change who you are to fit in. Don't completely erase who you are as a person, but instead allow yourself to develop a little further into the person you want to be.

Being yourself is the best way to head into a new situation because it means you'll feel much more comfortable and this will help put other people at ease. Remember, you're all in the same boat by being in this new place full of strangers.





Remembering my first week at university

We asked our writers to share their memories from starting university, and their advice for this year's students.

I was feeling completely overwhelmed



Sabrina Collier

Starting university was a nerve-racking time for me, which is completely understandable as I'd never lived away from home and was moving into a flat of strangers in the remote town of Aberystwyth in Wales. Luckily, I already knew Aberystwyth well from family holidays there, and it's a small town, so I knew I'd be fine on that front. However, this didn't stop me from having a brief cry on my very first night in my new room, right after I'd hugged and said goodbye to my family. I was feeling completely overwhelmed.

To make things more difficult, I was not only sharing a flat (and tiny kitchen) with about 20 other students, but also sharing a room with a complete stranger. This sort of arrangement isn't normal at UK universities, but that year Aberystwyth had accepted more students than they could accommodate, meaning some of us were put in single rooms with bunk beds. I eventually got my own room in November.

Going back to my first night, before my roommate had arrived, I remember feeling very intimidated by the sheer number of people in my flat and how loud and excited they were. It's embarrassing, but I remember hiding in my room while they were laughing and drinking together in the hallway. I remember thinking I should go out and introduce myself, but I couldn't bring myself to. Eventually I came out to the kitchen to make tea after they'd gone. Another girl also appeared, a really friendly Swiss girl (with her own room... jealous) who said she felt the same way, so we bonded over our mutual shyness. She was really into horse-riding, so a while later I went to the first Riding Club social with her...despite not being a horse rider.



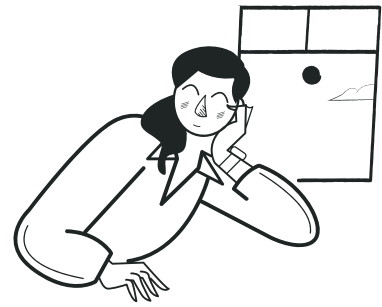


I eventually went out on the Friday of freshers' week, to the Students' Union. It's embarrassing to admit, but it was the first time I'd ever been to a club, so it was a new experience for me. I remember asking my flat mates: "Is the music meant to be so loud you can't hear yourself think?!" Of course, not having been out as a sixth former made me a slightly socially awkward drunk who thought it was cool to write drunk Facebook statuses, and generally say a lot of stupid things - *cringe*.

If you don't want to go out and you're not into drinking, you shouldn't feel pressurised to do so, but, despite this, I definitely feel as though my shyness and nervousness made me miss out on the typical freshers' experience. So, if you're not into nights out and boozing, don't worry: it's natural to feel anxious, but don't let that feeling stop you from getting to know your flatmates and meeting new people (there are plenty of ways to do so that don't involve drinking).

Don't let fear or anxiety stop you from doing anything you want to do, whether it's studying abroad in a faraway country with a culture completely different to your own, or simply trying a sport you've never tried before at uni. Go for it. The more you get out of your comfort zone, the more memories you'll have to look back on from your time at university.

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I often look back to the uncertain, beer-soaked days of my first year at Queen Mary University in Mile End with rose-tinted glasses

Mathilde Frot

I often look back to the uncertain, beer-soaked days of my first year at Queen Mary University in Mile End with rose-tinted glasses. Last night, after spending the entire day doing grown-up things like laundry and killing spiders with squares of toilet roll, I found myself praising my university's abominable student bar, the infamous Draper's Bar & Kitchen.

Draper's was heaven on earth - the lights were depressing, the floors were sticky with beer and vomit and people would literally grope you on the dancefloor, but you could get unashamedly sloshed, before speaking to (and kissing) strangers in the smoking area who found your stated ambition in life to hitchhike to Berlin entralling.

I sometimes miss those contrived yet enthusiastic conversations, because I know that if I were to strike up a similar conversation at work instead of the inane and awkward "what are your plans for the weekend?" I'd probably be referred to HR. Yet, the truth is, I don't actually want to hitchhike to Berlin because it sounds dangerous - and I need to stay at home to water my potted plants.

Despite the hype, most people find their first weeks at university to be a bit like their first sexual experience - mildly disappointing, if not tarnished by paralysing loneliness or some horrifically embarrassing and amateurish mistake (setting off your halls' fire alarm after thinking a sock over the smoke detector would allow you to smoke indoors, for example).



I was always a bit of a yutz - to give you an idea, I wore a Tony the Tiger t-shirt to my high school graduation while all of my classmates were in suits, heels and bandage dresses. Suffice it to say, braving the intimidating crowds of freshers' week and ordering my first drink at the bar as a late bloomer proved somewhat unnerving.

By second year, however, I was asking friends to meet me at Draper's as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Which is why I take comfort in knowing that another cohort of heavily perfumed wide-eyed freshers will brave the elements at Draper's Bar and Kitchen very soon. If you're going to be one of them, don't worry if it all seems overwhelming. You've got at least three years to make this place feel like home. Plus, when it's only

£3 for a shot and mixer on Monday and Wednesday nights, why wouldn't you?



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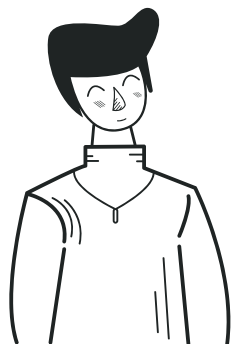
My first week of university passed in what now feels like a blur, a succession of late nights and lazy mornings

Craig O'Callaghan

My first week of university passed in what now feels like a blur, a succession of late nights and lazy mornings spent making friends in the way most students do (especially in the UK), by drinking lots of alcohol in cheap nightclubs. I think I was fortunate in that I quickly made lots of friends with people in the same block of flats as me and the atmosphere was very social. People were always visiting each other's flats and planning nights out together which helped break down the awkwardness that always happens when meeting new people for the first time.

Perhaps the only downside to how well I got on with people in my halls of residence was how little effort I made to get to know people on my course. With only six hours of teaching a week, it took me a while to get to know anybody else in my tutorials and even by the time I graduated there was nobody on my course I would have considered to be a very close friend. Of course, it's impossible to see and do everything and meet everybody, particularly in those hectic first few weeks, but I could have gone to more course socials.

I also largely ignored the vast number of societies and sports teams at university, preferring instead to stay in with friends or go to the pub. Having been quite interested in playing football or another sport at university (albeit not at a very competitive level), I only ended up playing once in my first semester. By doing so, I made a couple of really good friends but I was never that interested in playing again. The same thing happened with societies. There's practically a society for everything at most universities now, from Pokémon to fine wine, but I never became a member of any of them. While I don't think I massively missed out, I realised in my final year how few things I had to put on my CV.



Despite not taking advantage of every opportunity available to me, I thoroughly enjoyed my first weeks at university. It probably helped that I could already cook (a few meals at least), made friends quickly and was used to being away from home. Although I suddenly had a much greater level of independence, it didn't feel unusual in any way. Unlike some of the friends I made, I didn't spend my student loan too quickly or neglect my studies, two mistakes which can instantly make university life more stressful than it needs to be.

Belkis Megraoui

For several reasons, my few years at university may have not qualified for typical perception of 'university life'. To many of us, university is a time of independence, self-discovery, and an abundance of 'adulthood'. If you happen to opt out of the residential student life on campus, then you'll probably also opt out of the authentic university experience that we're all so used to hearing stories about – which was the sad (but quite convenient) case for me.

Although I may have been privileged in that I was able to stay away from the gruelling responsibilities of campus life and the often unforeseen (and dare I say, miserable) circumstances that come with it, I still wish I could look back at those long, four years of my life and boast something along the lines of, "Yes! I lived in a flat with complete strangers and owned the term 'adulthood' like a boss!" ...of course, that didn't happen.

So, with that brief disclaimer firmly embedded in mind, I will begin to let you in on my experiences as an awkward and unsociable 'newbie' during my first week at university. To be honest with you, I'm not a typically shy nor socially awkward human – quite the contrary. However, I cannot help but confess to you that university – particularly at first – somewhat brought out that socially inept penguin in me. As a student, I had struggled with anxiety and even bouts of depression as everything else seemed to be going pear-shaped throughout. I hated my life and I hated anyone that tried to approach me, excitedly introducing themselves with a cheesy grin plastered on their happy faces'.

Prior to all of this, I remember being so excited about the sheer fact that I was finally going off to study in the cute, serene little town called Hatfield (in Hertfordshire), away from the hustle and bustle of London. But once I was there, I couldn't help but notice one major obstacle:

public transport. It was so awful! I mean really, without getting into the nitty gritty of things, my commute to and from campus became the absolute bane of my entire grinchy existence at the time. I kid you not.

But, all negativity aside, my first week at university was pretty decent, spent just attending lectures and seminars, eating in the canteen, studying in the Learning Resources Centre, losing my way around campus and even crying at one point...or maybe a few. For the remainder of my first year, I didn't get involved with any societies or volunteering, except for my brief three months as a volunteer Radio Host at the university's very own radio station. As for making friends and socializing, well, you can probably already guess why that remained far from claiming a place in my list of favourite things to do'.

Of course, overall, what I did manage to accomplish was a stronger will, perseverance, and obviously a degree! Eventually, the (what I like to call) 'Hogwarts style' graduation ceremony I had the pleasure of graduating at did a very good job in ensuring that I was actually going to miss this university which had plagued my life for the past four years.

To many of us, university is a time of independence, self-discovery, and an abundance of 'adulthood'





Niamh Ollerton

Getting my head around the idea of going to university never felt like a chore – I was eagerly anticipating the next chapter.

Although I had my heart set on attending Newcastle University in 2011, it seems the universe had other plans for me. The year I got into uni was the last one right before UK tuition fees went up to £9,000 a year, so as you can imagine, everyone wanted a place at university before the inevitable debt trebled.

I fell just shy of the grades for my chosen universities, so clearing was my new best friend. After a tense morning, I eventually decided I'd go to Swansea University to study English Literature and Spanish.

And what a blessing in disguise that was – my experiences at university surpassed those of all my friends. It ended up being the best decision I ever made.

Going through clearing may be the reason I threw myself in at the deep end and made the most out of Swansea University from beginning to end. Without any preconceptions of what to expect, it made uni even more enjoyable.

Thinking back to Freshers Week, it seems like a crazy blur. The annual 'Fresh 'n' Free' student event the night before enrolment for all first years was carnage. I lost my room key (yes, I may have lost four more during the year), needed to borrow my flatmates' clothes to sign up for my course, and with a face like thunder it's a wonder I made any new friends at all.

As a joint honours' student I needed to enrol in two different departments, which with an aching head and a new location to explore seemed all too difficult.

Join the clubs that interest you, try to make some friends in your flat/halls of residence, and go to every Freshers event you can – you'll wish you had in second year



Luckily, a friendly girl was in the same boat, and after a morning spent together sorting our electives out I'd made a friend for life. Six years later, she's still one of my best friends and we now live together in London.

So, the moral of the story is, put yourself out there in Freshers Week. Join the clubs that interest you, try to make some friends in your flat/halls of residence, and go to every Freshers event you can – you'll wish you had in second year.

I had six flatmates, who were all for the most part perfectly matched – one is still a best friend to this day after living with me for many years (god help her) and another is like my brother.

Our whole block (shout out to Flat 179) seemed to be at Swansea through clearing, so we all had something in common right from the start. But we were extremely lucky in our placement. With 63 people in one building, you'd be right in thinking not everyone would get on – but that wasn't the case for us.

Throughout Freshers Week, and the rest of the year, you'd often find 30 of us trying to sort out taxis so we could all get to town together. We couldn't have been luckier.

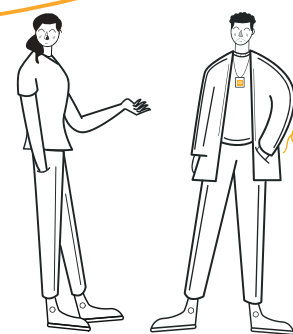
I realise now more than ever that university isn't only about the location or the education – it's about the people you meet. If I could do it all over I wouldn't change a thing.

My advice is speak to anyone and everyone during your degree, learn from these people, who you may never have met back home, but most of all throw yourself in and have fun. It only lasts three or four years, and I'm sure you'll miss your university days once it's all over. My friends and I sure do.

I realize now more than ever that university isn't only about the location or the education – it's about the people you meet. If I could do it all over I wouldn't change a thing



My major regret from my first week at university, and my time at university in general, is not signing up to any societies in freshers fair, particularly as I never really felt I found my 'tribe' at university



Julia Gilmore

Coming to university after a year out of education has its pros and cons. As one of the youngest students in my year at school, I would have only recently turned 18 when I started university if I hadn't taken a year out to work and travel, something I was keen to avoid as I wanted to grow up a bit before starting my degree. Having the chance to leave home and my family and friends for long stretches of time during my gap year helped me become more independent and make friends with completely new people, often from quite different backgrounds.

However, I underestimated how this time out would make getting back into studying that much harder, and how different it would be going away to another city to live in for three years, rather than just visiting for a short period of time. I felt less excited about my first week than I would have been if I'd been fresh out of school, as I thought (wrongly, as it turns out) that a Charlie and the Chocolate Factory themed night at the Newcastle University student's union wouldn't be nearly as fun as dancing on a beach in Thailand until sunrise. However, I have some memories of my first week at university that I reminisce about with as much fondness as many of my travelling adventures.

I distinctly remember having a 'Zoo night' during freshers where each accommodation had to dress up as a different animal. Trying to create a parrot costume on a limited budget essentially only using the Newcastle branch of Primark, in the style of a zoological Ru Paul's Drag Race challenge, was stressful but strangely enjoyable. Less enjoyable was getting home from my friend Lizzie's accommodation (two miles from my own) at 8am, shedding feathers in my wake, after crashing on her floor the night before.

My major regret from my first week at university, and my time at university in general, is not signing up to any societies in freshers fair, particularly as I never really felt I found my 'tribe' at university.

A sports team was always going to be out of the question for me (even the thought of 'training' makes me feel a bit unwell), but I wish I'd joined one of the hundreds of societies on offer instead of feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of choice and students at the fair.

My first week wasn't perfect (my three tearful phone calls to my mum are testament to that), but it was fun, and I got through it relatively unscathed, managing to avoid any catastrophic hangovers or the dreaded freshers' flu. I finished the week, and, in the end, my whole degree, knowing that I'd chosen the right university for me. I initially chose Newcastle because I fell in love with the city itself, with the university being secondary, something that I wouldn't advise for everyone (your chosen course is obviously a major factor in the university experience) but does help when you're devoting most of your year to living in one place.

The fact that I could hop on a metro train and be on the beach in half an hour (albeit a very, very cold beach) never stopped being exciting, the nightlife continually beat my home city of London, the locals were always friendly, and despite being a relatively small city, there was always something new to explore. If you're struggling in your first week, focus on what made you choose your university in the first place, because there's always positives to be found, even if it's just really, really good cheesy chips at the end of a night out.

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