

When I first came to university, less than seven months ago, I wish I had someone to tell me about the journey I was embarking on. There have been plenty of good times as well as bad, and my experiences are very similar to many other “freshers” out there. Therefore, I am writing this short guide to ease you into your first year at university. Whether you’re fresh out of college, returning after a gap year, or attending as a mature student who hasn’t been in the study scene for a while, I hope this manual helps you prepare in some way for the next stage in your adventure.

Some people like to prepare for university over time, collecting things alongside their daily tasks; whereas others like to do everything in one go. Some will be commuting from home, whereas others will be moving out. Keeping this in mind, I have split the process into “chapters” where you can dip in and out for the tasks that suit you. The guide is also split into two parts: before university, and once you’re there.

I wish you luck on your journey and hope you’re one of the ones who know what to expect!

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PART II: YOU’RE HERE!

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University Arrangements

Most universities are a great help when it comes to their students. Their websites are your first port of call for any questions you may have, and if still unanswered, ring the correct department for what you need to avoid being put on hold and re-routed. If you have questions about your room or living arrangements, ring the accommodation department. If you want to

know about your course, from term dates to course structure, ring the administration for your course.

Make sure you sort out your finances well in advance. In the UK, for first time students, Student Finance England covers tuition fees as well as maintenance costs. Some courses at some universities may offer bursaries. You should ring their finance department to see if you're eligible for anything, but most universities are good at applying all students for the help that meet the scheme's criteria. Your school/college should guide you through your SFE application. It is all done online, with a number to call if you need help.

Waiting times on the phone may run over five minutes when the application deadline approaches and around exam result periods, as people rush to sort everything out. It's best to write down all your questions before phoning anyone so you make sure you don't forget anything. Email is always an option but do expect a while for a response as universities will have a large number of students with many questions emailing.

In the chapter on studying essentials, we will look at what items you will need to study at university, from stationary to course books.

Lists, lists, lists

When I was preparing for university, I had lists upon lists for everything I needed to remember. The only problem was I had so many different lists all over the place, and repetitions of items, that I was paranoid I'd forget something.

When making lists, it would be helpful to have a note book to carry around with you. It could be sophisticated A4 pages doubled over and stapled. You won't get everything down on paper in one go, which is why you should keep your list book nearby.

Split your lists into: bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, university. As you go through your day jot down everything you use, because you will need those when you get to university. For example, bathroom would include toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, shampoo, towel, toilet roll. We will go through each list individually over the coming chapters.

Packing your wardrobe

Going to university is always a perfect excuse for a shopping spree, but do remember that you can't take everything with you. It's also a perfect time to clear out your wardrobe.

When it comes to sorting out your wardrobe, you need to dedicate a good part of the day depending on how many things you have crammed in. Start by emptying the wardrobe. Take it all out and dump it on your bed. Create a huge mess. This makes sure nothing is left hidden out of sight, and you don't need to repeat the process, or give up half way through.

You will need three piles: 1. Charity; 2. Leave at home; 3. Taking with you. The titles are self-explanatory, but there are a few things to consider when contemplating which pile to put an item of clothing in. If you haven't worn it for more than three months, and you're not going to wear it again, or if it's worn out, no matter how many memories you associate with it, put it in the charity pile - even if it's torn or nothing but rags, put it in the charity pile. Charities often sell on rags to textile companies for money.

If you've had to wear smart clothes for work or for school/college, do not dump them carelessly into the charity pile unless they are ripped or unusable. Some courses, such as medicine, require students to go on placements where they have to dress smart. Other courses do not require this, but it's always best to have a smart pair of trousers as there will be parties, events and occasions that require you to dress smart. Any spares you can leave at home. As a student you will most likely live in jeans. Make sure you have at least two pairs. Do not bother storing up for the sun as when spring does come, you will no doubt go shopping again. Things can get cold at university, even in your room, so ensure you pack all your warm hoodies, and tops. Don't forget socks and underwear!

Try not to get carried away! You will need to leave a few things at home for the occasions you do return as it's easier than lugging a suitcase from one place to another.

You can't buy everything anew, and you will most likely be buying whilst at university. Do pack sports outfits and your swimming costume for when you're settled and decide to join a sports society or gym.

Packing your favourite things

Probably one of the hardest tasks you'll have to do that will require some sacrifices. When at university, it will be a rarity where you get to sit down and do that one-thousand piece jigsaw. Whatever your hobby, pack a little, not all. Be it painting, reading, knitting, play station... you won't need all your canvases, books, balls of thread or games. You can always replenish your stock when you run low, and until you gauge how much time you really have and how much you really want to be doing the things you do now, the little you take will see you through.

Packing your kitchen

For many of us, the thought of cooking our own meals is daunting. Not having cooked a major meal before, I was worried about what I would need. For those who know how to cook, by all means, skip this chapter as this chapter will look at just the basic equipment needed for basic meals. Simple recipes are given in a later chapter entitled "I CAN'T COOK!" in part 2 of this guide.

On a daily basis you will need a bowl, a plate, a glass, mug, spoon, fork, butter knife and a cutting knife so it's best to pack two of each. You may also want to pack a cutting board, a frying pan, a sieve, a saucepan, a cooking pot with lid and a wooden spoon. You may want a few plastic containers for your lunch, to store left overs, and to use as snacking containers with cut up fruit throughout the day.

Those are the essentials that I have in my cupboard and have survived on for seven months.

When it comes to cooking staples, make sure you keep stocked on the following: a loaf of bread, milk, margarine, eggs, fruit, frozen vegetables, salad items such as lettuce and cucumber, your favourite snacks, cereal, sugar, frozen fish, frozen waffles, cooking oil (e.g. Olive Oil), sugar, salt and Oxo cubes. Try your hardest never to run out of these items. Some of these things you may turn your nose up at, but it was only when I started at university did I learn the importance of what I put in my body, and the "I CAN'T COOK!" chapter will later deal with trying to establish a healthy diet which gives you your needed vitamins and minerals as well as allows you to enjoy your snacks.

Also for your kitchen you may wish to have oven gloves and a dish cloth. You might wish to keep these things in your room, or you may wish to keep them in a cupboard in the kitchen. It is essential that you tidy up after yourself and put your things away to avoid people complaining, and to avoid people using your things.

Packing for your new life

Having your own place is really exciting, but also annoying when you realise you don't have the things you would like to have at hand. Universities don't provide bedding so do pack a duvet, pillows and bed spreads. I also recommend a blanket and a mini-heater for when it's cold as many universities/ shared houses control the heating at specific times which means you may very well be shivering in the winter. Mini-heaters are cheap and can be bought from your local highstreet. They keep you warm and you get to turn them on whenever you want.

Other items that may elude you include tissues, a rag for wiping up anything you spill on the floor/ dusting, a clock, a watch, indoor slippers, a chair if your university doesn't provide one although you do tend to get a desk. You may wish to take framed photos, and a few things of sentimental value. Plasters come in handy as do scissors, a hot water bottle, Sellotape, laundry basket, bin and cushions.

Studying essentials

Most students have a laptop. Wi-fi is provided in halls and on university campuses. I also recommend investing in your own printer. This avoids having to pay credit for printing things out from university printers, as well as avoids long queues and restricted opening times. You'll need A4 plain paper regardless of whether you own a printer for any revision poster

making you do, and you'll need A4 lined paper, and lots of it. Have a few folders with dividers and wallets to keep everything in a neat, orderly manner which makes it easier to revise from. You'll need pens, pencils, post-it notes and a calculator for most courses. Any extra stationary for your course should be listed in your course booklet. Don't go overboard with investing in stationary as during the first week of university there are "Fresher Fairs" that provide plenty of free pens, post-its, and other cool stationary. Do get yourself a hole puncher, stapler and scissors. Think about getting blu-tack if you know you can stick things up.

If living in a city such as London, or commuting every day, you may wish to invest in a travel card that works out cheaper if you buy it on a weekly/monthly basis. Check the internet or go down to your local station for information on bus travel cards, train travel cards, and student discounts. Often, to prove you're a student in the UK you'll need a student card which can be bought online from NUS that also gets you discounts at shops, or they may require you to get a travel card saying you're a student from a specific company. For example, to get discounts on the trains, I needed to get a national railway student card. Some cards expire after a year, others after three years, and others after your course, but they are worth investing in.

Your university ID is given to you during your enrolment which is often in the first week at university. This ID can prove you're a student at the university, allow you access to parts of the university not open to the public, but doesn't get you discounts except for a few shops close to your campus who offer special deals.

Last minute bag

On moving day you will need to pack anything that you've been using up till that morning. This includes your phone charger, wallet, toothbrush, retainers, glasses case, make-up, and medication.

Don't forget to pack deodorants, any moisturisers and beauty products you may use and a small mirror.

Put in any paper work you may have: letters from the university, information about your starting dates and enrolment, information about your new accommodation and anything else the university may have sent through to you.

Talking to others

Any older friends or siblings that have been to university can share many stories with you about what it will be like. Do listen to them and take what they say on board, but remember you'll have your own experiences, and you too will enjoy it. They may be able to answer any questions you have about university life, but no one ever mentioned to me what cutlery to take!

Parents will also have their own suggestions of what you need. Even if you disagree, just nod and let them buy you what they think you need. After all, you'll never know if you need it or not until the time comes, and if you don't end up using it, you can always pass it on as a "thoughtful" birthday present (a perk of being a student means you can't always buy awesome gifts!).

Don't let someone else do everything for you. Take charge and sort it out yourself. Let others guide you and offer suggestions, but remember you'll be living with whatever you take, so you need to know what you have and don't have, what you want and don't want, and what you'll take and what you'll leave behind.

If you do leave something behind, it's not the end of the world. When you next pay a visit you can collect it then or have it posted to you.

DO NOT INVEST IN TEXT BOOKS BEFORE YOU GET TO UNIVERSITY. We will cover the right text books for your course in Part II.

PART II

Uni Life

First week is always fresher week. You'll get to go to a fair that will have a stall from every society on campus. You'll sign up for way more societies than you'll ever join, but you get a sense of how much the university offers and what there is for you to do. It's also fun collecting all the freebies and meeting older students, as well as students in your year.

Also during fresher's week, there will be lots of events for newbies. Do go to the ones that suit you and mingle. You'll meet a lot of people in the same boat as you, and people from different courses. Don't expect to make life-long friends at this stage. This is just to ease you into the next stage of your life.

Each course is made up differently in terms of contact hours. There will most definitely be lectures. Some universities may have started taking attendance: not like a register at school but where you swipe in with your ID card. However, most universities don't tend to take attendance so of course it is up to you if you attend or not. It's always ideal to go to as many lectures as you can. Even if you don't get something, or it's the most boring topic ever, you may glean something from the lecture, or at least sit with people who will become friends. Anything you don't understand you can always track down the lecturer at the end and ask. Either email them or rush to the front at the end and stop them leaving.

You also have tutorials which are made up of a smaller group of people to cover what you've been learning in lectures. You are set questions and worksheets beforehand which you complete and bring with you. If you didn't get it, don't panic. Tutorials are a space for you to go through the questions, mark your own work, and make sure you understand what's going

on. This is the ideal place to confess you don't get something and go over it very carefully until you do.

Problem solving workshops differ from lecturer to lecturer, university to university. Some lecturers expect you to do the work before-hand, others expect you to work through it together. It's most like a classroom setting you're used to with a smaller group than you would have in a lecture, but larger than a tutorial group, with a "teacher" at the front going over the concepts and asking questions.

Depending on your course you may also have lab work, computer work, dissection, seminars and other times of learning with different names. Attend everything in the first few weeks to get a feel of what you can afford to miss, what you enjoy, where attendance is taken, how your course works, and to meet people on your course.

There isn't usually homework other than tutorials and workshops, although you may wish to read around lectures. Lecturers often recommend text books. **DO NOT BUY THEM.** Even if a second year student is selling them cheap. Go to the library and take out the textbook. If people have gotten there before you, get an older edition or find a similar textbook. Usually, the topic you are doing are covered by numerous textbooks and only compromise a chapter or two in the entire textbook. Using the library is free, and you have access to more textbooks than if you bought the ones that are recommended. Recommended does not mean you need them, and often the ones that are recommended you may not like, and instead prefer another textbook with the same content but prettier pictures. So before you buy any textbook, check out your university library.

Having said that, some courses may require you to have specific work books that you need to invest in. I can't think of a course that does this, but in that case the university should tell you. If you're unsure if you need to buy any books, ring up the administration department for your course. They will tell you if you need any books before you get there.

Put off buying any books until you start your course and then look for the book that suits you.

As a student you will be given a personal tutor. Some universities make it mandatory for you to meet your personal tutor, whereas others never see their tutor. If your university doesn't arrange a meet, and your tutor doesn't get in touch, email them saying hello so they know who you are. If you ever have a problem, they are the first person to go to, so it's best to know who they are. If you don't like them, adopt someone else in the university, be it your favourite lecturer or tutorial teacher. Make sure someone on the staff knows who you are so if you need their help they can help you in the best way for you and you aren't scared or nervous about approaching them.

If after a few months you loathe your course, you cannot do it, don't despair. You can always change your course either within the department or within the university with little difficulty in some cases. Speak to your personal tutor and they will guide you the best way. Sometimes it may be you love the course but just don't understand a word, in which case you may get extra help.

Universities also offer other forms of support: counselling, chaplains to talk to, student advice service covering housing to budgeting, sexual health clinic and a service for handing in coursework or picking up course material. Familiarise yourself with where they are and what each deals with so you know where to go with any problems you have. Also look into how you access them. Some of them require appointments, some of them may require a staff member to refer you, others may require you to fill in a form, some may be confidential so no one except you know you are seeking their help, others may wish to pass on details. All this information should be on the university website, and you can always email to ask.

Making Friends

A few of your old school friends may stay in touch. However, don't be upset if you lose touch with them as you all get busy with your new life. Some people settle into university really quickly, whereas for others it takes time.

It took a few months for me to feel settled, and for my friend it took longer. At the beginning don't expect to have a "best" friend, but do expect people to be friendly. Talk to the people you sit with in lectures and in your groups during your tutorials. Grab lunch together or study together or spend breaks between lectures together. Sit in the same spot with the same people for a while until you develop a friendship. This takes time and requires continuity. You could meet lots of new people but unless you see them frequently you are unlikely to develop a strong friendship.

Join a society which is a great way to meet people from other courses and to do something you enjoy. Go to events which are fun and try to go with a friend or go with the aim of making a friend. Talk to the people you live with. Get out and do things.

Make plans and invite people. If they say no, go out and do things. Explore your university and your area. Don't be disheartened. With continuity, eventually you will have a small group of people who you spend time with at university.

Don't rush things, and be patient.

Time Management

It's easy to have fun and let things slide, or to do nothing but study and find you don't have a social life. Getting a balance is key.

Structure your days around your university timetable. Spend breaks between lectures studying if need be so you have evenings free, or spend those breaks with friends so you have evenings to study. Do what suits you best. Not all courses require you to study away, but some courses such as medicine have a huge volume of work to make sure you stay up to date. Put in times you will be out at parties or events, but don't do it every night. Make sure you have a balance of studying and fun so you get work done and enjoy yourself. Only you know

how much work you can get done, and also how much work your course demands. If your lectures cover everything and there is no extra reading, you'll have a lot of free time, so enjoy.

Do factor in times to do your domestic duties which we will cover in the next chapter.

Invest in a diary where you can write in your lectures, university commitments, events, meeting up with friends, etc. It will make sure you don't double book and you can see how much time you have to get everything done. It's also useful for lists and reminders of what to do. If you keep it up to date, it will be a great help.

Domestic Duties

This doesn't take long and only requires a couple of hours every week. Put aside an evening or weekend morning to tidy your room, empty your bin, get the shopping in (always go with a shopping list), vacuum your room, and do your laundry.

When it comes to laundry you may have heard that you need to separate your whites from your colours. Unless you have something that runs, don't bother doing two loads. Shove it all in, pour in the laundry detergent and set to 60 degrees and return in 90 minutes. Obviously if there is something that needs special treatment, don't shove it in. You should change your undergarments and socks every day, your jeans can go up to a week, tops usually can be worn twice or thrice unless you sweat or spill something on it. Bed clothes can go once a month, unless you eat in your bed, in which case do it more often. Towels can go every fortnight. Invest in a box of laundry powder or laundry tablets. With powder, pour in about a cup into one of the trays. With tablets, break two over your clothes. This will save money.

Your room is small. It should be easy to keep everything in its place. Remove any dirty dishes once you've used them. Don't throw food in your room bin – it'll just smell. Keep your work filed after every day, and you shall inhabit a clean place.

I CAN'T COOK!

Everyone has the ability to make themselves food to survive on.

Let's start with breakfast. Skipping breakfast is not recommended, and the easiest thing to eat, even if a bit, is cereal.

To save money, take packed lunch with you. The main item will be sandwiches: whole-wheat bread with lettuce, cucumber and tomatoes; or cheese sandwiches; or meat sandwiches; or egg. Change the stuffing to add variation. Supplement with fruit: banana, grapes, oranges, apple, kiwi or pear.

Avoid snacking, but if you can't resist then do help yourself to some fruit.

Finally, the big worry: dinners.

Fish, mashed potato and veg is a classic meal.

Bake the fish in the oven for 30 minutes or so, turning over half way, until it doesn't ooze when you stab it with a knife.

Boil frozen vegetables in water for 20 minutes until soft. Sieve.

Chop two small potatoes, or half a large one, into small pieces (remove the skin too!). Boil in water until soft. Drain the water. Use a fork to mash the potatoes together. You can add a little warm milk to make it mushier.

Now you have fish, mashed potato and veg, and it only took half an hour.

Egg-fried rice

Incredibly easy. Boil about a tea cup of rice (it expands so don't cook too much!) in about two tea cups of water. It will absorb the water so you don't need to sieve. Once the water is gone, and the rice is soft, place in frying pan and crack an egg over it and fry. I found this to be a little bland so add peppers and seasonings. You can also add onions and other extras if you have time.

Pasta

Overrated but so simple. Boil pasta in water until soft. Sieve. Done. I add Oxo cubes to give it flavour. Most people add pasta sauce, but you can chop up your own tomatoes, onions, peppers, garlic and other extras and add. All you have to do is boil.

Soup

Choose your vegetables: I recommend leeks, tomatoes, garlic, potatoes and carrots. Boil in water – don't put too much water in! Add Oxo cube – two if needed. Leave for 30 minutes until soft and then enjoy.

For all these recipes don't be afraid of getting it wrong. Experiment and when you have more time, or feel brave enough, print some recipes off the internet and have a go at cooking some of your favourite foods.

Another great food resource is your Mum. She can freeze dinners during the week so when you go home you can stock up on frozen dinners. Just take it out of the freezer in the morning and eat in the evening once you've warmed it up.

Supermarkets also do ready-meals which you just stick in the microwave, and you can always have fast-food, but try not to have too many of these as they are high in salt and cholesterol and ultimately bad for your health.

Ensure you eat your five fruit and vegetables a day, have three proper meals and indulge in some chocolate, yoghurt or whatever takes your fancy.

Final word

Going to university is an adventure. Try new things, make new friends, and have fun. Good luck.