Starting University: information for parents of new students

The first few weeks

The way students react to their first few weeks here will be affected by many factors including:
- Personality and attitude to life
- Previous experiences at school or college
- Previous life experiences and relationships
- Current family situation, for example, recent bereavement or illness
- Whether the course meets their expectations
- Expectations (from self or others) of high levels of achievement
- Practical issues, for example, financial or accommodation problems

Some students settle very quickly. They may phone home at regular intervals to keep in touch, let you know that things are going well, perhaps occasionally seek reassurance or ask advice. Or, they may throw themselves into university life and not phone very often. Parents generally know when lack of communication means life is going well and when it may be of concern.

Many students have a more mixed experience. They may take longer to feel settled and worry about whether life at the University will work out for them.

Some of the problems they may experience are:
- Homesickness
- Worries about fitting in and being accepted
- Making friends
- Course/study issues
- Concerns from the past

What can help

Time

It may sound like a cliché, but encouraging a student to "give it time" is often useful. Many of the problems students experience at the beginning are a normal part of the transition to university life and do get better with time. For example, feelings of strangeness and dislocation, of not being known or feeling of little importance to others here, will ease as students gradually get to know other students and a few members of staff remember their names and as they find some places on campus where they feel comfortable. Some people make friends more quickly than others.

There can be an element of luck involved in finding people quickly with a similar outlook. Early social contact with other students is usually with others in the same corridor of the residence. If those in the immediate vicinity are not on the same wavelength, some may worry that they will not have other opportunities to make friends. In time, it is likely that most will find other ways of meeting people, perhaps through joining one of the many University clubs and societies or through the course.

Talking to someone else in the University

There are a number of people available for students to talk to. Sometimes a listening ear is enough to help the person to feel that there is someone who is interested and who knows their name, or who can offer practical advice. It can also be extremely helpful for students to hear that they are not the only ones who are finding things difficult. Most, if not all, of those who are struggling believe that they are in a tiny minority and that virtually everyone else is having a wonderful time. This is far from being the case. Coming to University can be tough for many students.
The following support is available to students:

- Personal tutor: each student will be allocated a personal tutor in his/her Department who has both an academic and pastoral role.
- Wardens and hall tutors: students in University-managed halls of residence will be allocated a hall tutor, who has a pastoral role. The Warden has overall responsibility for student well-being in these residences.
- Student Services Centre - Financial support: practical advice and support for students on welfare matters, including finances and support funds.
- Student Services Centre - Academic Support: tuition and advice on academic writing and study skill issues, and on dyslexia screening and assessment.
- Student Services Centre - Disability Policy Advisory Unit: support for students with disabilities, including mental health problems. Each academic school has a Disability Liaison Officer with a particular responsibility to offer advice and guidance to students and staff in that school on disability issues.
- International Office Student Support Team: advice and support on welfare and personal issues as well as other practical concerns for all students whose home is outside the United Kingdom.
- Chaplains: support and advice to students of all religions and none.
- Students’ Union welfare reps: informal support and advice in each residence, including self-catering accommodation.
- Students' Union Welfare Officer: a full-time post with responsibility for welfare issues
- Students’ Union Advice and Representation Centre: can help with practical problems relating to housing, finances, changing course, employment and legal rights.
- Students’ Union Nightline and Gayline services: both are listening and information telephone services offering a friendly ear to students.
- University Counselling Service: a free, confidential service from professionally qualified counsellors for a wide range of issues which is available to all students and staff
- Cripps Health Centre: GP and other healthcare services

Changing accommodation

It may be possible for students who are particularly unhappy with their accommodation to move, though not usually immediately. Those who are either in University accommodation or would like to be may talk to a member of staff in the University Accommodation office. Contact details for this, or any of the above services are on the University website or available from any member of staff.

Leaving

If, after allowing enough time for things to change, and having talked it through, a student is convinced that things won't improve enough for him/her to want to stay, leaving the University may be a positive choice. There is no shame in deciding that this is not the right time or place to be at university. It can be important for the student to know that there are other options. For some, especially those who are deeply homesick, changing to a university nearer home, can be a realistic option. Others may benefit from further time to find out what is right for them. It can help a great deal for them to be told that getting a first or 2:1, or indeed any degree, is not the only way to a fulfilling or successful life. It is often possible to return to study later on.

How parents can help

- Being at the other end of a phone and willing to listen is enormously important. At the very least, it reminds students that there is another world in which they are important and cared for.
• You can also help them to step back from their situation, which may help them to feel less overwhelmed and find some solutions themselves.
• You may be able to support/encourage them to talk to someone in the University (which may in itself seem daunting).
• Helping them to reduce their expectations of themselves so they don't feel that they have to be such a high achiever.
• Letting them know that it is normal to feel anxious at the start of University.

When the situation becomes particularly difficult

• The student rings you very often and is clearly upset or crying
• You strongly suspect that something is wrong but the student won't talk to you
• He/she wants to come home each weekend
• He/she wants to leave very soon after arriving here

It is very hard for parents to be aware that their son or daughter is unhappy and not to be able to do something to improve the situation. The student may be trying to develop greater independence at this time, or may be hoping that you can solve the problem. It can be difficult to work out how to respond: whether to encourage him/her to come home regularly, or to give weekend social life at the University a chance; to support the student in a decision to leave or advocate staying on. Encouraging the student to think about the kinds of actions that might help and to follow this up shows your support, but ensures that they take the necessary action themselves.

You may want to telephone a member of staff to find out what is going on. Since the University has an obligation to respect the privacy of students, it will not usually be possible to give you information about the welfare of your son/daughter. Your enquiry will normally be responded to with some general information or an offer to pass on your concerns to the student. If you wish to give information to staff about the student, for example, about previous difficulties, the staff member may need to tell the student you have done so.

If there are serious concerns

The University will do everything possible to help students in difficulty. It does not, however, have parental responsibility and will only offer support if approached by the student, unless the situation is serious and staff become aware that the student is thought to be at risk. In such a case, appropriate action will be taken by those concerned. This is a rare occurrence.

If you have serious concerns, and your son or daughter is not willing or able to take any action, one option may be for you to visit your son/daughter to help him/her obtain appropriate support. This is likely to be much more difficult for parents not living in this country. In this situation, you may wish to talk on the telephone to the student's personal tutor or a member of staff in the International Office Student Support team.

Support for parents

Staff at the University Counselling Service are always willing to talk to concerned parents. We will not be able to tell you if your son/daughter is attending the Service, unless you already know this. If this is the case, we will not be able to divulge information about his/her well-being, since confidentiality is vital to our work and for those in counselling to feel safe to speak freely. We will usually, however, be able to advise you in general terms about possible courses of action. Students who wish to see a counsellor will be offered an initial appointment, and the counsellor will then assess the urgency of the situation if further help is needed.
Starting University:

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