



**University of  
Nottingham**  
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

**University Counselling Service**

# **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:

- The student's personality and attitude to life
- Their previous experiences at school or college
- Their previous life experiences and relationships
- The student's 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 how things are going, perhaps seek reassurance, or ask advice. Alternatively, 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 do.

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 or in the same flat. 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 several people available for students to talk to. Sometimes a listening ear is enough to help the person to feel that someone is interested and knows their name and 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:** Students will be allocated a personal tutor in their department/school who has both an academic and pastoral role.
- **Residential Support Teams:** students in university-managed halls of residence will be able to access residential support staff. These teams have overall responsibility for student support in these residences.
- **Student Services Centre - Financial support:** practical advice and support for students on welfare matters, including finances and support funds.
- **Libraries - Student Academic Skills Team:** tuition and advice on academic writing and study skill issues, and on dyslexia screening and assessment.
- **Student Services Centre - Disability Support Services:** 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.
- **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:** a listening and information telephone service 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 (doctor) 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 in university accommodation or would like to be may need to contact the Accommodation team to see whether this can be arranged or speak with their Support and Wellbeing Officer

Contact details for this, or any of the above services are on the University website or available from any member of support staff.

## Leaving

If, after allowing enough time for things to change, and having talked it through, a student is convinced that things will not improve enough for them 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 and as a start, they can talk to the Student Union Advice Centre or their personal tutor. For some, especially those who are very homesick, changing to a university nearer home, might be an option. Others may benefit from further time to find out what is right for them. It can help significantly to tell them 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.

### **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 seem daunting but is usually very helpful).
- Helping them to reduce their expectations of themselves so they do not feel that they must be such a high achiever/popular/completely adjusted to university life.
- Letting them know that it is normal to feel anxious at the start of university.

### **When the situation becomes particularly difficult**

- Your child/young adult relative rings you very often and is clearly upset or crying
- You strongly suspect that something is wrong, but they won't talk to you about it
- They want to come home each weekend
- They want to leave very soon after arriving at university

It is very hard for parents to be aware that their child/young adult relative is unhappy but to feel unable to do something to improve the situation. Your child/young adult relative may be trying to develop greater independence or may be hoping that you can solve the problem. It can be difficult to work out how to respond: whether to encourage them to come home regularly, or to give weekend social life at the University a chance; whether to support your child/young adult relative in a decision to leave or advocate staying on. Encouraging your child/young adult relative to think about the kinds of actions that might help and to follow this up, shows your support, while ensuring 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 child/young adult relative. 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 your child/young adult relative - for example, about previous difficulties - the staff member may need to tell them you have done so.

### **If there are serious concerns**

The University will do everything possible to help students in difficulty. However, it does not 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 child is not willing or able to take any action, one option may be for you to visit them to help them 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 Support and Wellbeing Team in the student's faculty, or to the Residential Support staff in their accommodation.

### **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 child is attending the Service. We will not be able to divulge information about their well-being, since confidentiality is vital to our work and for those in counselling to feel safe to speak freely. We will usually 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.