

What Can You Expect at University?

There are many young people who have never thought of going to University, while there are others who've never considered anything else. In both groups, there will be those who've researched this option, and whose decisions are well-founded. However, there will also be more than a few whose picture of University life and their fitness for it may be mistaken, some perhaps over-estimating their capacities, while others underrate theirs.

Your son/daughter's academic fitness for University is easily assessed, as each institution's website and prospectus offer clear statements of subject and grade entry requirements. If still uncertain, he/she should phone or e-mail the University in question, or attend one of its Open Days. Few people entering University have to leave because they can't cope with the course.

Students can differ enormously in how they spend a typical day. For instance, a Physics undergraduate might attend two or three lectures and perform laboratory work. By contrast, an English student might only attend one lecture and one seminar (discussion group), but spend several additional hours doing related reading and/or essay writing. Some courses may require study on most evenings; others may not.

Sixth forms and FE colleges environments promote maturity, but most students there can rely on staff chivvying them for anything urgent. This won't happen at Uni, and (if they don't already) your son/daughter will have to prepare materials or submit work by deadlines without reminders (though even poorly-organised students learn to manage this in time).

At University, you have to supply your own study materials, including course books. However, this needn't be expensive, as the campus bookshop can supply most required texts in paperback editions, while many student's unions offer cheap second-hand ones left by last year's cohort.

Many students choose a nearby University which enables them to live at home. This carries certain advantages, such as little or no-cost accommodation, ready facilities for washing, cooking, etc., (possibly) meals made for you, and the company and support of family. That said, living away from home usually speeds maturity both socially and in other ways.

First-years (sometimes called 'freshers') can opt to live with other students in a hall of residence. These vary in size, but offer privacy (you have your own room), plus the chance to meet people besides those on your course. Unless the hall is self-catering, breakfast and dinner are usually served. However, some students prefer to rent a room off-campus, or share a flat or house. Prices and standards can vary considerably, though, making it safest to select from those approved by the Accommodation Office.

Universities have excellent facilities, and where one's reputation rests largely on a specialism (e.g. Sport or Performing Arts), these can be outstanding. Some academic departments have forged strong links with local employers (e.g. in science and technology). This may allow your son/daughter to obtain at least one high-quality work placement tailored to their career interests.

The typical student age-range was once 18-25, but countless people older than this are now welcomed. They may have preferred to postpone their Higher Education, or been obliged to through circumstances. Also, many organisations now sponsor employees (often part-time) to let them obtain a qualification likely to be of mutual benefit. The life experience these students bring often enriches discussions, both in and out of the classroom.

Finally, each University has a range of services whose remit is to provide information or help, year-round. Medical treatment, personal counselling, financial advice, and career guidance are among those most sought, and there is no charge for any.

Dr Paul Greer Updated February 2020