

Parent Partnership Service Cheshire East

Spring 2014 Newsletter

For parents and carers of children who have special educational needs

Transition to University

Written by a former student of Staffordshire University

Two days after moving into my room in Halls of Residence at Staffordshire University, I phoned home.

“See how you feel in a week. You’ll probably be more settled,” my mum told me.

Reluctantly, I agreed, believing that in a week’s time, I’d be back at home.

A week later, I was back at home, but only for the weekend. Another week of Uni, “to see how things go”.

At first, that’s how I managed, by breaking it up into small, achievable, time-based goals.

Like many, I found student life was very different to what I was used to. It took a while to settle, but I’m glad I gave it the chance.

I went home for regular breaks, which helped me enjoy the time I spent at Uni. It wasn’t long until I only went home every few weeks or so because I was having such a great time at Staffs.

My main piece of advice would be to realise that starting Uni is inevitably stressful, and that if your son / daughter says they hate it, it doesn’t mean all hope’s lost! Knowing that it’s going to be stressful means when the stress hits, it’s easier to manage.

There’s also ways to help starting Uni be less stressful and more enjoyable. Here’s a few...

Apply for DSA

Applying for Disabled Students’ Allowance well before the academic year is the most important thing to do!

I had my DSA assessment a few months before University started. It meant I knew well before Freshers’ Week what support I was entitled to, and – crucially – the University knew, too.

The computer and printer I got through DSA were with me a few days after I moved into Halls. Hooray – I was reunited with Facebook! Oh, and could do Uni work.

I had a Learning Support Agreement (LSA) right from the start, which outlined what support I could get. It meant that I could make use of what my LSA specified, such as negotiating assignment deadline extensions with lecturers. I could have note-takers in my lectures and weekly meetings with my study mentor right from the start.

If I hadn't had all this..? It would have added so much extra stress to what was an already hectic time. Having support set up was the deciding factor between me staying or dropping out. Get that DSA application in asap!

Choosing the right place

Whether your child's commuting to Uni or staying in Halls, the distance from your home will likely be very important. One of the reasons I chose to study at Staffs is because it was just over an hour by both car and train from my parents' house, which meant I could make those frequent weekend trips home during the first few months of Uni fairly easily. It was far enough though for me to be independent, so once I was more settled I got to appreciate the freedom of living away from the parents!

Open Days are of course really important in deciding where to study. If at all possible, take the time to explore the surrounding area – it really helps get a better feel for the place and what it would be like to study and live there.

Getting around

Lots of new students worry about finding their way around campus and the wider area. University events (both those available for all new students and ones specifically for new students with disabilities) which are held before term starts are well worth going to.

A few weeks before starting, I got the train to Stoke with my mum, and we spent the day going around the city. It helped me with learning my route from campus to the city centre, so it meant I had the

confidence to go there on my own a few weeks later. It isn't possible for everyone to do this, especially if the University is on the other side of the country, but it's worth doing if you can.

Meeting people

My number one worry about University was making friends.

“Everyone else is in the same boat” is the stock response to this. A bit reassuring, but I couldn't help but feel that many in the same boat as me were better equipped: they would confidently swim into new friendships, while maybe I'd be left drifting.

The events held by the University before term starts (mentioned above) are great opportunities to meet others and make friends. One of my most meaningful friendships came from meeting someone at the Summer School I went to before starting.

Whether it's in Halls (I didn't become good friends with my flatmates, but I know others who got on fantastically with theirs), others on the same Uni Course, through events, there are lots of chances to meet new people and create meaningful friendships.

Students' Union

In terms of meeting people, the Students' Union is fantastic.

Pretty much all Universities have lots of student clubs and societies to get involved with – a list of these can usually be found on the University's Students' Union website (for Staffs, it's www.staffsunion.com). These are fantastic ways to meet new people who have similar interests, as well as being great activities to get involved in anyway.

Most Students' Unions will have some specific support for disabled students, which is separate to what the University offers. Often, they'll have a “Disabled Students' Rep” (or a variation on that name) who's a current student elected by other students who represents issues which affect disabled students in both the Students' Union and the University.

At Staffs, the Students' Union has a group called the Disabled Students' Forum, which has an elected representative, but also has other disabled students actively involved. It holds regular meetings,

social events, campaigns and events on campus, and is open for any disabled student at Staffs to be a part of – whether they want to raise concerns about a specific issue, to be part of the collective campaigning, or just to get to know more people. The Disabled Students' Forum started just over a year ago, and I'm happy to have been its first elected rep.

Any disabled students thinking of coming to Staffs are welcome to post any questions on the Forum's Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/disabledstudentsforum> or alternatively email disabledstudentsforum@hotmail.co.uk

There's more info on the Disabled Students' Forum and the Union's other liberation Forums at <http://www.staffsunion.com/liberationforums/>

Quick Tips:

- Check out the University's website, both before and after applying – most will have a section specifically for disabled students (for Staffs, it's <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/study/disabled/>). This will help you get an idea of what particular support the University offers (including things like Counselling services), and also who to contact for more info.
- For many students (apart from those living in catered Halls, commuting from home, etc.), starting Uni = starting cooking. Before I went, my mum taught me preparing several basic, healthy meals which I could easily cook for myself in Halls. We made a mini recipe booklet of these. It meant that, though I enjoy cooking, I had plenty of quick and easy recipes I could do while I was learning how to use a new kitchen. Recipes that use non-perishable items (tinned food, pastas, etc.) – store cupboard essentials – are really helpful, so in case they can't get to the shops that easily or often, there's still food to cook without worrying so much about use-by dates.
- Make the most of resources to help with independent living. I spent the summer before Uni having regular mobility sessions with someone from my local visual impairment support charity, especially focusing on using public transport on my own. Local authorities and charities can offer various types of support for different disabilities, so, if you haven't already, see what's on offer.
- Remind your son / daughter that University is a fantastic experience, so enjoy it!

I graduated last month. Three amazing years led up to the moment I went across the stage and got my degree.

University has been a life-changing experience. I've met so many people, made so many friends, done so many things.

Do I go back home much anymore? I see my family every-so-often, like for special occasions, or if I miss the cat. But Stoke is now my home. I remember what it was like three years ago when it all was so new, when I couldn't imagine staying. Starting University *is* daunting, but it's so worth it.

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