Parents' guide to university

Advice on studying and living independently
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University challenge
Embarking on a new journey

It’s a sad moment as you say goodbye to your child heading off to university, but it’s also a time to celebrate - all the hard work that you and your offspring have put into reaching this goal has paid off. In this special supplement we give advice and guidance to parents and students who are starting out on this momentous journey. Writing the personal statement is one of the first challenges - as law student Adam Mawson says: “It’s like a job interview, you have to say why you want it, what you like about it and something you have done that makes you unique.”

Open days are a very good way of finding out what an institution and its town are really like, and we look at the benefits of going on a visit with your child. As Hayley Sacks says: “My mum knows me better than I know myself and it was really important to have her there with me.”

There is also information on the costs of accommodation and living expenses. In most cases students pay for with a means-tested maintenance loan, to help you determine how much extra financial support you need to give your child. We give advice on how students can make ends meet at Wolverhampton University, for example, the students’ union runs financial workshops and in three years they have seen student financial problems halved.

And there is also a trip-down memory lane with the recollections of five parents who describe how things have changed, as Fiona Ward says: “I was on a full grant and thought I was rich - I bought branded trainers and chocolate - whereas one of my sons had to have a spreadsheet to track his expenditure.”

Overview

Goodbye home comforts ...

Moving away from home to live and study independently can be a big step for young people and their parents. Gavan Naden suggests some tips on how both can adapt to university life

Most parents admit they spent the first night in a hotel near the university last year, and their child wasn’t coping. But parent Sandra James said she now believes that was a mistake. “I think once my son had settled in, moving away made it worse. He got embarrassed I was still there, which made it more upsetting.”

However, Margaret Turnbull puts a positive spin on the experience and finds life much freer since her children left home. Helen became a primary schoolteacher, and her daughter University last year, and her daughter

Through the academic side is a priority, the social aspect of university is a huge pull for students. It’s natural to want young adults to cope well with the demands of a new life. The academic side is a priority, the social aspect of university is a huge pull for students. It’s natural to want young adults to cope well with the demands of a new life. The academic side is a priority, the social aspect of university is a huge pull for students.

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How to sell yourself

University applicants need to write a personal statement. But what should you write and how do you strike the right note? Liz Lightfoot offers some advice on what tutors like to see.

The personal statement is the part of the application form where students can “sell” themselves to admission tutors. Applicants must write up to 4,000 characters, or 47 lines, to convince universities to offer them a place. But finding the right tone is tricky. Boasting is out, modesty is self-defeating and trying to be funny can be dangerous. No wonder that applicants turn to family and teachers for advice. But are they getting the right guidance?

A study by the Sutton Trust found that the academic focus of the personal statement is not always understood by teachers, who tended to praise general passages about subjects. The admission tutors liked to see more detailed discussion and analysis of particular aspects of the subject that had caught the student’s interest and made them think.

Universities don’t want banalities, clichés or flattery. They want to see concrete, recent, relevant examples that demonstrate the student’s interest and understanding of the chosen discipline.

We want to hear what they do to pursue their interests outside the curriculum.

It’s not enough to have wanted to do something all your life or to be fascinated by history.

Writing about yourself is stressful, but once you get your ideas down, then it’s not so bad, says Adam Mawardi, 20, a second-year law student at Keele University. “I did my first draft and thought: good, job done. Then I read it through and realised it was incoherent in places and lacked structure. It took a lot of revisions to get it right. It’s like a job interview: you have to say why you want it, what you like about it, the qualities you would bring and then, at the end, perhaps something you have done that makes you unique.”

A good personal statement focuses on the course and why the applicant wants to do it, says Kelly Boulton, undergraduate admissions manager at the University of Nottingham.

The Ucas process: How it works

Ucas Stand for Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the centralised system to match applicants with places.

Apply Students apply for up to five university courses through the online system.

Track Ucas sends the application forms to the five universities. Unis can offer a firm place, a conditional one on meeting set grades, or a rejection.

Choices Applicants can accept two offers: firm and insurance. The insurance choice should be a safety net, offering lower grades.

Extra choices Those with no offers can apply for other courses through Track.

Results When exam results are published, candidates get confirmed places for either their firm or insurance choice or are put into clearing.

Clearing The process that matches unsuccessful applicants with available places. Applicants seek universities themselves through the search tool and apply to each individually.

Adjustment Applicants whose exam results meet and exceed their firm offer have a limited period to apply to different universities or courses.
Budgeting

Ways on a tight budget can be tricky, but student union advisers can help, writes Richard Doughty

Budgets can affect the best-prepared student. Loans may not arrive on time, a parent may lose their job, or a landlord can raise the rent. And, of course, first years can spend beyond their limit early on and leave themselves with little to live on the rest of the term.

Most universities provide student advisers and hardship funds to tide students over. But it’s important to approach the right person for help. Andrea Simpson, a money adviser at a university, says students should see their student union (SU) adviser first rather than the university. “First approach the right person for help. Parents and students need to know their rights and responsibilities, particularly when signing rental contracts with a university or private landlord. Students should ask their university if it can check the tenancy contract before they sign. Parents have to understand their role as a rent guarantor for their child and to scrutinise rental payment plans – they may require a large, and unwelcome, upfront payment.”

Clarke’s basic advice is simple: “Check out everything well in advance before you decide on a university. Then make sure you have all in place before your son or daughter enrols.”

Finance

Putting a child through university is expensive, which is why it makes sense to know all the outgoings involved, funding available and money-saving deals, writes Richard Doughty

University is a large, long-term investment for both students and parent budgets. Good reason, then, for some judicious shopping around to compare courses and accommodations to obtain best value for money.

Annual tuition fees up to £9,000 for state-funded institutions get paid direct to universities in the form of a loan, which students start to repay after graduation once they earn over £23,000. Accommodation and living expenses vary widely, so most students pay for with a separate, means-tested maintenance loan provided by the state-run Student Loans Company, determine how much you as a parent need to financially support your children. Unless you are facing severe economic hardship and are eligible for state support, the shortfall you need to pay to make up the full loan amount is dictated by your annual household income.

Is it cheaper to live in university halls or private rented accommodation – by far the biggest budget item? There is no simple answer. If a student shares with others in private accommodation, it can be cheaper, but few first-years consider this in advance.

Chris Oakes-Morgan, a maths teacher in Hampshire, says he pays £200 a month to each of his two daughters to make up his household’s annual means-tested contribution of around £2,500 towards their living expenses. Each daughter may then take out a maintenance loan after subtracting the parental contribution of £3,750 – up to a maximum of £3,200 living away from home, outside London; £1,700 (living away from home, in London), or £695 (living at home). Add mobile phone contracts, insurance, tax and breakdown cover on a car they share during vacations plus other expenses, and Oakes-Morgan’s annual outlay is around £3,000. Despite that, both daughters also have part-time jobs to get by.

Hazel Farman, a medical student at UEA and renting accommodation in Norwich, gets the minimum loan, with her parents making up the shortfall. The intensive course prevents her from taking a job but she spends much of her spare time volunteering for St John’s Ambulance at music gigs so gets in for free.

“In her first year she tracked what her outgoings were,” says Hazel’s father, Lee, an IT consultant. “One of the big issues is that they have no idea what their living costs will be. It depends on how they react to things, what’s expected of them, how well they manage their budget. If Hazel had any problems, she’d come to me.”

Lee considers Hazel’s five-year course as sound value for money. “Medics have one of the highest student/lecturer contact times at over 12 hours a week,” he says. “It’s a good deal when you look at what you’ll need to earn before they repay it, and how long they have to pay it back.”

Lee is an IT consultant. “Certain low earners may never have to repay the full amount. At the moment, it’s probably the cheapest way of funding university. If people understand they should easily be able to cover what is effectively a student tax for the future, it gives them a different mindset to just seeing it as a burden.”

Tips for making ends meet

Food
Buy supermarket own brands, much cheaper than their branded equivalents. Head for the reduced price counters, consider meal deals.

Grants
Apply for internal university grants early, first come, first served.

Loans
They are based on nine not 12 months’ minimum living expenses, so get part-time work.

Job
Holiday-working for a national supermarket chain may mean you can transfer to a branch near your university.

Budgeting
Check for hidden course costs: field trips, CRB checks etc. Put something by adding tax to the cost of items. Check out studentcalculator.org, moneysavingexpert.com for online budgeting and best deals.

Books
Seek student accounts with no interest-free overdrafts – very useful when loan payments are delayed.

Computers
There’s free use on campus. Laptop owners should beware of taking their device to work, it’s much cheaper online.

Basic texts, not the full course list, and use the library.
What a difference a year makes

A placement year offers experience and a better chance of getting full-time work. By Gavan Naden

You’re two-thirds of the way through your degree, ready for the final push, so what do you do? Go and work for a year, of course. A placement year offers a chance to gain valuable, practical and often paid experience with the opportunity to make contacts that could lead to full-time employment. The vast majority of placements start immediately after the second year.

Such courses are proving popular, and universities have now broadened their second year, of course. A placement year offers a chance to do something different, of a downside. Students take the theoretical practice into the workplace and see things through. Some then use that year in their dissertation and streamlines the process by connecting new recruits with players and students are advised to use all their resources, including personal contacts, websites and university services. An up-to-date CV helps, as does thinking hard about the reasons why you’ll fit into the company. Better to do fewer, more targeted applications than a mass trawl with a generic application. Key strategies include applying early, doing your research, staying flexible and open-minded.

Mike Hill, chief executive of Prospects, the official career website for the university sector, believes students all benefit from placement years. “I can’t think of a downside. Students take the theoretical practice into the workplace and see things through. Some then use that year in their dissertation and others get invited back to the organisation. It gives the student a chance to see if they enjoy the job, and the employer a chance to assess the student and take them on full-time if they fit in with the culture and they feel they can trust them.”

“Other students travel abroad, and that can be of huge benefit, especially for language students. A placement year shows you have a work ethos and makes you far more employable.”

Last year, the multinational conglomerate GE in the UK had 320 interns in 26 locations. It advertises placements online from September, and streamlines the process by connecting new recruits with old hands and answering all those niggling questions, such as: Where will I live? How will I support myself? As with many of the big companies, figures for GE show 20% of interns are invited back to a permanent role after completing their degrees.

You can earn up to £27,000 on a placement  Getty

Case study

‘You learn more from rejection’

Josh Hampton, 22, from Doncaster is studying accountancy at the University of Hull – he reflects on a placement with GE

During my second year I applied to quite a few companies, including Jaguar Landrover, Croybank, and KPMG. For inspiration I just looked around my room, to see what things I had, and applied to that company, asking if they did placements. I was once in a bar and spotted a bottle of Moët champagne, so I emailed Moët. Although they came back and said they didn’t do placement years, they did offer to talk to me when I graduated because they liked my initiative. It’s probably not the most ordered method, but it seems to work.

“Before applying, I always research the company as much as possible, and my CV is reasonably impressive. I’ve had short placements and a part-time job at Toby Carvery, which gave me more confidence, as I was having to deal with people - that helped develop my communication skills. I also went through a series of mock interviews at my university to get myself ready.

“After a telephone interview, then a face-to-face interview at an assessment centre, I got a placement with GE, in Manchester. I was offered a couple of roles, and took the one in finance.

“I really enjoyed the responsibility, but the uncertainty was difficult, and my first day was probably the toughest. My initial contract ran from June to June, but that got extended to August and then September. That kept me in role after the other interns had finished and I couldn’t afford to pay for a three-bedroom house on my own. At first it looked as though I was going to be promoted and

sent to a different office, so GE offered to fund my accommodation. However, I ended up in a different role, and was still based out of Manchester, and GE paid for a house.

“I got a lot of feedback, and afterwards they provided a tri-page report on my performance and development. So if I ever go for a job with them, I can bring that up.

“As a result, I’ve changed a lot. I’ve always been ambitious, but now I’m more effective with my time. I’ve become much more driven as the result of my placement and exposure to high-flyers from the US.

“My advice is don’t be put off by a rejection: you learn so much more from rejection than you do from success and it makes you try things differently the next time. And you can maintain friendships during the year by keeping in touch and seeing them for birthdays and so on.

“Ultimately I hope to get a job with PwC – that would be my dream, as an accountancy job - and to get a first, of course.” GN
Parting is such sweet sorrow

Can relationships survive when university calls? Gavan Naden considers some of the options

Life's big decisions don't always come easy. And matters of the heart can play heavy when it comes to choosing a university. Having struck up a relationship in the sixth form, it's not surprising some students are hesitant to break ties and head in different directions.

For parents, there's also a fine line between head and heart. Jan Waller, from Birmingham, wanted her son to be happy, but thought his travelling home every weekend would impede his studies. "Jim was having doubts about his relationship," she says, "but it was important he made up his own mind, so although I stayed supportive and talked the situation through with him, I tried hard not to tell him what to do. In the end they agreed to part and see how it goes. That seemed to satisfy them both. They can always get back together if things are meant to be."

Although many relationships have foundered due to the distance and lack of contact, others have stood the test of time. Claire Bentley, from Watford, got together with her boyfriend two months before she went to the University of Winchester. "He was going to Sheffield, so we thought maybe it was best to take a break. But we carried on talking, and a few weeks after freshers' week we decided we could make it work, even though there's a four and a half hour train journey between us.

"Getting the balance right between seeing each other and lecture time, courses and assignments is tricky. We both decided to put our work first and take our laptops so we can work when we see each other. "Most of my friends have broken up and wonder how we do it. And although it has been hard, the time goes quickly. My parents thought as long as I was happy, they were fine, so they never interfered."

"We see each other every four to five weeks and it can be quite expensive. Getting the balance right between seeing each other and lecture time, courses and assignments is tricky. We both decided to put our work first and take our laptops so we can work when we see each other. "Most of my friends have broken up and wonder how we do it. And although it has been hard, the time goes quickly. My parents thought as long as I was happy, they were fine, so they never interfered."

There's no right or wrong answer, but the general advice is, if you start to feel the strain, make sure you talk to someone and don't wait until the situation gets out of hand. If you're missing someone, feeling homesick, anxious, or have work concerns, there are people on campus who can help.

Like many universities, Nottingham provides a specialist and confidential counselling service, accessible by anyone registered there. This can be in the form of workshops, group sessions, or individual counselling for personal and psychological problems.

Concerned parents can phone for general advice, although counsellors are unable to divulge any information about individual students. Friends are also encouraged to speak up. The University of Nottingham said: "If you are worried about a friend, one of the counsellors can talk to you about the situation and perhaps suggest where your friend may best obtain help."

A simple online form can be filled out to make an appointment. Counselling does not affect your academic record, so don't suffer in silence.

"I knew it would be an issue, as it's a four-hour journey between us by train. I'm quite independent and it was something I needed to do. "I am glad I don't have the pressure of going home every weekend, and I've been able to use that time to make new friends and meet new people. "It was daunting, as I didn't know what was going to happen, but it's nice to be my own person while I'm at uni, and do what I like for a while. "We're still friends and on speaking terms and it's completely fine. My mum and dad were really good about it. They said: 'You've had good times together and you'll both be OK.'"

"Coming back to university after Christmas was difficult because I got used to home comforts, so now I text message my parents most days and FaceTime once or twice a week. And occasionally they come to see me and make a weekend of it. "They have always said go after what you want, meet new people and try new things, and during exams, Dad said: 'Just try your best; that's all you can do.' If there are any problems, he said he'd come straight down." GN
The student experience – then and now

Has university life changed beyond recognition for a new generation of undergraduates or is it the same as it ever was? Five parents remember their days on campus and compare their own experiences of being a student with their children’s. Interviews by Liz Lightfoot

L
ong gone but not forgotten are those carefree student days of shared showers, deserted rental properties and parties where the booze always ran out before midnight. Being a student was quite a privilege in the good old days when local authorities and the government footed the bill and there was almost certainly a job at the end of it. In the early 1960s, only 4% of young people start undergraduate degrees – but it comes at a cost. Today’s students leave with debts of £40,000 or more. I remember my parents: they were working hard and more consistently, their parents believe. Partly, it is the move away from “big bang” final exams to continuous assessment, they say, but also the pressure to get that all-important 2:1 or above degree classification. One-third of students are awarded Firsts or 2:1s in 2017. Last year it was over two-thirds: 75%.

Today’s students are more career-oriented and under pressure to take on extracurricular activities, more responsibilities and work experience to compete in the graduate jobs market. Meeting people, making friends for life and discovering new interests: these are the things that have not changed for students who are following the same route to independence as their parents. But students are working harder and more consistently, their parents believe. Partly, it is the move away from “big bang” final exams to continuous assessment, they say, but also the pressure to get that all-important 2:1 or above degree classification. One-third of students are awarded Firsts or 2:1s in 2017. Last year it was over two-thirds: 75%.

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I had three fantastic years embracing university life. I was heavily involved in student politics and was the news editor of the student newspaper. It was very social with lots of parties and concerts. It all seems a lot duller for my daughter, who is studying English and linguistics. There doesn’t seem to be the same level of activities going on. Most students seem to be there to get their heads down and work. I get the impression that student life is no longer the rite of passage it used to be.

I started my degree in 1980 with an economics degree from Newcastle Polytechnic, now Northumbria University, and joined the Ford Motor Company graduate training scheme. My choice of degree was an important factor in getting my first job, but my extracurricular activities were just as important. I think this should be taken into account when choosing a university.

I was at the University of Bristol in 1982-86, studying for a chemistry BSc and PhD. We had to work hard, but I enjoyed it and was involved in a lot of other activities: sport, music and Christian groups. Bristol was a great place to be a student. I got a lot from university: good qualifications, friends from different places and backgrounds, a wider view of the world – and a wife.

Andrew Jones
Scientific working in industry, Chester

I studied social sciences at Lanchester Polytechnic then did a master’s in public administration at Brunel University in 1985. Both my sons are studying chemistry, one at Sheffield, the other at Liverpool. They get 20-25 hours of tuition a week, whereas I had half that, but made up for it with time in the library. The essentials of university life are very similar, though. It’s a fairly comfortable road to independence: they experience leaving home and looking after themselves in a relatively safe environment. What’s different is the money side – they are graduating with much bigger debts than their parents.

I studied engineering, and though I did the necessary labs, my priority was rowing.

Andrew Gray
Founder and director, Conscious Solutions, Somerset

I studied engineering at Cambridge, but a lot of my time was spent rowing. The terms were short, just eight weeks, and, though I did the necessary labs, my priority was the rowing team. You could do that in the late 70s because there wasn’t continuous assessment.

My eldest son has graduated with an engineering degree from Birmingham and my youngest is just about to study engineering at Durham. My daughter is studying science at Edinburgh. They are working more consistently because they are examined more regularly, and the grades count towards the final degree. Apart from the money side – they are graduating with much bigger debts than their parents.

It’s all much more serious today. I studied history in 1977-76 before qualifying as a solicitor, and chose the University of Exeter pretty much on a whim. It sounded like a nice place but I’d never actually been there before arriving with my trunk at the start of the first term. It’s been very different with our children: we’ve trawled up and down the country for countless open days. There seems to be much more choice and it puts increased pressure on them to make the right choices.

Fiona Ward
Solicitor, Barnardos Training and Learning Consultancy, Chester

With a grant, I thought I was rich: I bought things I couldn’t afford before, like chocolate.
At home or in halls?

First-year students face a choice of where to live. Gavan Naden considers the pros and cons.

The bright lights of London may seem appealing, but students soon notice they’re paying a price for the privilege. The cost of accommodation in the capital can seriously dent any loan, so it’s no wonder – according to 2014-15 figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency – almost a quarter of students choose to live at home with mum and dad.

The benefits of living in the parental home include a full fridge, dirty washing sorted, the comfort and support of your family, and debts increasing more slowly. Living in halls or a flat is a luxury few students simply can’t afford.

Some students simply can’t afford.

Living in halls or a flat is a luxury your family, and debts increasing more slowly. Living in halls or a flat is a luxury few students simply can’t afford.

“Given my time again I’d choose a different university, but having said that, the teaching was amazing. I loved it. It would have been great to have Westminster but in a place like Manchester!”

The fear is that students living at home may miss out on the total experience and lose the chance to become independent, gain life skills and the sense of freedom that comes with looking after yourself.

Freshers who live at home may find it takes a little longer to make friendship groups. While those living in halls of residence can immerse themselves in student life from day one, and everything is close at hand 24/7.

But many universities attempt to redress the balance by providing special events for students who live at home. Ben Lewis, director of student support and wellbeing at Cardiff University says: “We offer a range of events for new students through our students union, including non-alcoholic events pitched to people who have to travel home at the end of the day.

“Lots of students can feel isolated, but help is available. We suggest they use social media and actively engage with the union, societies and their academic department, field trips and so on. Stay proactive, and if it doesn’t work out at first, try a different group of friends.”

Stay-at-homes may miss out on the total experience Getty

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Louise Clare 'A non-campus university gives you the best of both worlds'

How to choose between city chic or campus cool? Campus-based universities are proving immensely popular, not just for the courses, but for their safety, sociability and amenities. Although most are slightly out of town, they tend to be contained and self-sufficient.

City-based universities hold great appeal for students who want to integrate into the local culture and feel isolated by campus life. Louise Clare (left), 23, opted for a city university. In fact, she was so impressed by Sheffield, she applied to two universities in the city.

“I’m doing LLB law, with a year abroad. I am now in my final year and it’s been great. I love Sheffield and was set upon studying here after coming along to a couple of open days.

“From brightness and enjoy city life. Sheffield provided all the things I wanted. I love the atmosphere and enjoy being part of the community. There are lots of student areas, and apart from the first year when I was in a hall of residence, I’ve always lived with other students in houses.

“I shop in Meadowhall, which is quick tram ride away where they gear a lot of stuff towards students. There’s a cinema, bars and restaurants. And there are food festivals which are really good, like the Peddler Night Market.

“I love going to the bars and clubs and when I get home from lectures I can go to the ballet club in the city. Students are very well accepted and there’s good collaboration between us and the locals.

“If you want to experience somewhere lively and want to be part of the local community, then a non-campus university gives you the best of both worlds: you can explore the city’s culture and be close to friends.”

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Follow your dream

All students are judged on academic merit, and universities have a duty to meet their needs, so disabled or special needs students should not be discouraged from applying. By Liz Lightfoot

Students should contact universities to find out what support they offer

Students with disabilities or special educational needs should not be afraid to follow their dream of a university degree. Disabled students are entitled to be judged on academic merit in the same way as others, and given extra support.

No one says it is easy to live independently, study and take a part in student life if you need walking aids, breathing equipment or machines to help you decipher the material. But each year in the UK, hundreds of disabled students attend graduation ceremonies and are planning the next step in their lives.

Having a disability does not make you less clever, though not everyone acknowledges it. “I get annoyed when people speak to my parents and not to me, as if people in a wheelchair are incapable of understanding,” says Lucy Neat, who is studying modern languages at the University of Manchester and achieving first-class grades.

On top of the usual loans for fees and living costs, disabled students can claim grants for specialist equipment, non-medical help and travel. Under the Equality Act 2010, universities have a duty to meet disabled students’ needs.

There’s information on university websites, but it’s best if you visit, says Neat. “I loved the look of the course at Durham, but it was only when I got there that I realised about all the hills. I have to use sticks or a mobility scooter and that would have been very difficult.”

Neat receives a Snowdon grant to bridge the gap between the normal cost of university accommodation and the flat with kitchenette she needs to keep safe from chemicals and food that spark an attack. The Snowdon Trust awards grants for things that cannot be funded through other channels.

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Neat, who is studying modern languages at the University of Manchester and achieving first-class grades. On top of the usual loans for fees and living costs, disabled students can claim grants for specialist equipment, non-medical help and travel. Under the Equality Act 2010, universities have a duty to meet disabled students’ needs.

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Education means independence

After getting a master’s in engineering at Cardiff, Sean Doherty is now studying for a PhD

Sean Doherty was planning to go to university when a terrible mountain-bike accident left him paralysed from the chest down. He was 16 and had just finished GCSEs at Marling school in Stroud. Instead of putting him off going to university, his injury made him all the more determined.

“If you want to give yourself a better chance to contribute and be independent in life then education is probably the best way. My view was that if I wanted to do a good job without the same use of my body as most other people, then I would have to maximise what I can contribute with my mind,” says Doherty, who uses a wheelchair and relies on a 24-hour personal assistant.

“I always wanted to be an inventor from a young age and was keen to explore ways of helping wheelchair users, so I chose to study medical engineering.” But first he had to begin studying for his A-levels at Stoke Mandeville hospital before returning to the sixth form at his school to complete them.

“After looking around several universities, I chose Cardiff and Nottingham, largely because they had wheelchair rugby teams nearby but also because of their positive attitude to supporting disabled students,” Doherty says.

He finally decided on Cardiff - mainly because the terrain was flatter - and following four years of study, graduated with a 2:1 master’s in engineering. Now 24, he is doing a PhD at University College London, exploring the use of electrical stimulation to artificially restore bladder control.

“I qualified for the disabled student allowances but I couldn’t get funding towards accommodation for my personal assistant because it fell through the gaps in the different funding streams. I had to pursue loads of dead ends until, by chance, I found out about a great charity called the Snowdon Trust that will step in and help,” he says.

“I would say to anyone in my position that they should consider university,” Doherty says. “What you need to do is work out exactly what you want to study regardless of your disability. You can sort out the practical bits later. Then talk to the universities as early as you can and make sure you visit to get a feel for how manageable it will be.

“When you choose a university, it’s important to look at the accessibility, not just of the accommodation you will be offered but at other halls and flats where your friends will be, because you don’t want to miss the party.

Looking back at the time he spent at Cardiff university, Doherty adds: “I had a good social life, and while aspects of getting out are often harder, I made great friends and didn’t encounter much negative attitude from other students. I met my girlfriend at university and we have been together five years now.”

Interview by Liz Lightfoot
Open days are your chance to get behind the cleverly angled photos on university websites and get a feel for the place. They are usually tightly structured, so it helps to work out in advance what you want to see and the sessions you plan to attend.

Parents and friends are welcome to accompany applicants and most universities put on separate sessions for parents while their children take part in other activities, such as mock lectures and subject talks. Accommodation tours are always very popular, so book one in advance or as soon as you get there. Subject talks are very important and provide a chance to find out such things as the number of teaching hours, seminar sizes and the weighting of marks given to exams, project work, timed essays or presentations.

Early arrival gives you the opportunity to snoop around before you are herded into the reception area. Open days held in term time give the truest impression, but even those held in vacations will give applicants a chance to meet current students. Ambassador students are volunteers and are not usually handpicked, so take every opportunity to grill them.

Some universities, such as Edinburgh, run weekly student-run tours for applicants unable to attend open days. The University of Buckingham offers guided walking tours on demand and will arrange for applicants to speak to an academic in their chosen fields. “Our guided tours are very popular and many students then go on to attend our open days to find out as much as possible,” says James Seymour, director of admissions and recruitment.

Time and travel costs are the only limits on the number of open days you can attend and provide a chance to find out such things as the number of teaching hours, seminar sizes and the weighting of marks given to exams, project work, timed essays or presentations.

Subject talks are the most important “moments of truth” for prospective students when visiting a university says Sam Uzzell, head of market insight and data at the University of Surrey. An analysis of applicant feedback found that a third of visitors chose Surrey during the subject talk delivered by academics and current students.

Hold a conversation in advance with your child to find out what they want from university and what they would like you to do on the day, says Gareth Hughes, psychotherapist and researcher at the University of Derby. “Most students want their parents with them but it’s important that you do not take over. This is the beginning of them being independent and making decisions for themselves so they need to get used to it,” he says.

“Ask yourself if you could be driving your child down a particular route that might not suit them: thinking it makes sense to do business studies at X university rather than arts at Y university. We see students arrive who are not committed to the course - they have been on a conveyor belt of school and parents deciding things for them and when they get here they realise it wasn’t what they really wanted to do.”

Open days are the start of the process and most universities follow up with applicant days for students who have been offered a place. These are smaller and more focused on courses to help students decide their firm and insurance choices.
Once they've flown the nest ...

You've successfully seen your child off to university, so what now? It's a difficult adjustment for most parents, but Liz Lightfoot offers some advice on how to cope with that feeling of loss.

You've looked after them for 18 years through the good times and the bad. You've been a teacher, mentor, confidant, taxi service, chief cook and bottle washer and now they have gone. There's a strange stillness around the home as you take down the to-do list.

You miss them, of course, but university terms are short and the holidays long, so you can get the best of both worlds. There's more time to spend on yourself, your partner and friends and, before long, the children are back for reading week or Christmas as young adults with a new appreciation of home comforts.

Though in rare cases it could lead to depression or marital conflict, “empty nest syndrome”, the sense of loss which most parents feel, is normal. But it’s a chance to see more of friends, make newer ones and take up additional interests or challenges at work.

It can be hard at first, but you get used to it, says lecturer Patrick Mulrenan from south-east London. “Our twin sons left at the same time, one to Sussex and the other to Sheffield. It was terrible. I thought my life was over and I would never recover,” he says. “One minute you are a parent, the next minute you’re back to an empty house with all their stuff gone. I missed them dreadfully and I missed their friends coming round, too.”

Mulrenan and his wife went out more for a while, but then things settled back. “After about three weeks I realised I felt better. I thought: actually, this isn’t too bad.”

It’s normal to feel a sense of loss, says Naomi Smith, whose daughter Eleanor is studying maths with business management at the University of Birmingham. “My husband, Ian, was particularly sad when we dropped her off. I felt OK with it because I was so excited for her to be going to such a great university. It wasn’t until afterwards that I realised how much the dynamics of the family had changed.”

But don’t get too used to it. In three years they could boomerang back, given the price of housing. “All three of our daughters have left home,” says Robert Triffitt from Kent. “But we are a very close family and still see a lot of them. One even lives next door.”

Celia Dodd was devastated when the first of her three children left home. Unable to find much advice about surviving the empty nest, she wrote a book about it. Here are her top tips:

- It's a huge stage you are going through - as massive as giving birth - and it helps to acknowledge it. Adjustment takes time, but you will gradually start to feel better.
- In the early weeks, be quite self-indulgent. Framing a photo collage or even making patchwork from their old clothes can focus your attention in a positive way.
- Find someone to talk to who is really sympathetic. Look up old friends because you often find they know what you are going through.
- Your life is going in a new direction. It's time to think about yourself.
- Redefine your relationship with your children. See them as adults and build a more equal relationship that will keep them close for the rest of your life.

Celia Dodd, The Empty Nest: How to Survive and Stay Close to Your Adult Child, is published by Piatkus.