Your guide to
Clearing
2018

YOU’RE
IN!

theguardian.com/clearing-2018
Introduction

I’ve been a long, hot summer – and while the sun has been shining, you’ve been worrying about your A-level results. At last, the wait is over, and you finally get to find out your grades. If things haven’t gone as planned, however, there is another way – clearing. There are thousands of courses with vacancies listed on the UCAS clearing website, and nearly 67,000 students found a place through clearing last year.

In this special supplement, we look at how to go through clearing, and provide advice and information on every step of the process – from charging your phone to calling the hotlines, finding out about funding, taking in an open day or two, and deciding where to live. We speak to students who have been through clearing, to find out how they secured their place and what pointers they can offer.

“Failing to get my grades is the most valuable experience I’ve ever had,” says Danielle Cuffie. “If you fall flat on your face, you can still pull yourself up.”

So, log on to UCAS, seek out some courses that interest you, and draw up a list of questions you want to ask about the course and its university. And remember: the clearing teams are there to help you. As one phoneline volunteer says: “Even though it’s stressful, most students end up finding the right course – it’s a great feeling, knowing you can support them.” Sarah Jewell

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Clear targets

It's a buyer's market for students going through clearing, says Rachel Hall, so even students holding offers should consider rethinking their choices.

Last year, more than a tenth of all university places were filled via clearing, and 2018 looks set to be even bigger. What once was a last chance saloon for students who didn't get the grades is increasingly about offering students the chance to reapply. Have they chosen the right course at the right place to spend three to four years of their life? It can't hurt to shop around for a better fit.

Clearing officially starts on A-level results day, 16 August, although many universities will have already been advertising their vacancies and registering student applications from July. Thousands of universities will be looking to fill vacancies on courses that haven't yet been filled, and will hand out offers with a fixed acceptance window – normally a day or two – to the first students they hear from who meet their requirements. Naturally, the most popular courses and the most prestigious universities tend to run out of places first – some as soon as the phone lines open on the day itself.

But there are plenty of options available this year, so even students holding a firm offer and feeling confident about their grades may be looking around. "When I came to initially choosing my firm and insurance offers on Ucas, I rushed," says Katherine McLaughlin, who went through clearing last year despite hitting her grades. "I was swayed by other people's opinions and the fact the university offered reduced grade boundaries if you chose it as your firm. Almost instantly, I knew I had made a mistake."

McLaughlin is now headed into her second year of criminology and social policy at Loughborough University. She needed the extra time between accepting her Ucas offers and clearing to realise that she didn't want to study in a big city, and would rather be in a student town near big cities; and Loughborough fitted the bill.

But while clearing definitely offers a second chance, it's important to start the day prepared – especially if you have an idea of what you want. Emma Leech, director of marketing and advancement at Loughborough, points out that students accepted through clearing have higher dropout rates, possibly because they're rushed into making a choice or were influenced by non-essential factors. She adds that the clearing process will be better supported because they've rushed into making a choice or been influenced by non-essential factors. She adds that clearing in 2018 won't just be about students competing for places; universities will also be competing for students. Leech warns there may be some "unethical practices" as a result, with offers of laptops, tablets and bus travel passes dangled in front of students. "Don't go for shortcuts and things that glitter; it's student experience, outcomes, academic quality and provision that matter," she adds.

I was swayed by other opinions. Almost instantly I knew I'd made a mistake.

\[\text{Guide to Clearing 2018}\]

By the time you read this, clearing will have been open since 5 July to students without offers from their firm, and a big push in advance of clearing. "It's a buyer's market for students going through clearing, says Rachel Hall, so even students holding offers should consider rethinking their choices."

"I was a bit panicked when I got my A-level results. I was disappointed, like me, was celebrating - and anyone who didn't like the idea of staying at home, was staring at A-level results that you didn't like the idea of staying at home, was staring at A-level results."

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After my results, I felt so disappointed I spent the first half of the day out shopping. My parents were comforting and supportive, though, and I knew that even if I hadn’t done well, I still had the academic ability to do a degree. I was still set on studying to become a psychologist, and I’d put a lot of pressure on myself to go on to higher education.

I started ringing up other universities. I’d signed up for an email service from UCAS, which is how I heard Bedfordshire had places in psychology. It all happened quickly – I rang and spoke to an academic coordinator who was really welcoming. They asked me my English and maths GCSE grades – which were good – and then they made me an offer. I really liked the sound of the teaching style, and the course has exceeded my expectations.

Failing to get my grades is the most valuable experience I’ve ever had. It’s taught me not to limit myself, and to believe in myself. I’ve got over the disappointment, and I’m still on track for success.

I’m planning to do a doctorate in educational psychology in 2019 – so I’ve still got a bit more studying to do.

Failing to get my grades is the most valuable experience I’ve ever had. If you fall flat on your face, you can still pull yourself up – I’ve not allowed it to hold me back.
Exam grades

Three ways to secure your university future

Should you do clearing, risk a re-mark, or rest your exams?

Lucy Tobin finds out

‘I went through clearing’

Devon Naye, 23, just graduated with a degree in economics from Swansea University.

I'm off for my top choice degree, economics at Liverpool, but my results day found I'd got ABC. Although my family were disappointed – and I'd attended a grammar school where As were the expectation - I'd known my exams hadn’t gone well.

I wasn’t a fan of doing another A-level – I cycled through clearing. It was a pretty hectic day. I got an offer for business economics from Liverpool that I wasn't sure about – and when I rang back 30 minutes later to accept, the course had been filled.

After three days of me phoning unis, my dad spotted an economics course at Swansea in their open day pack. I called up and got an offer. It wasn’t the ideal start, but now I see clearing put me in the best situation in my life to date.

I had an amazing time there, got a first, and start a graduate job with Lloyds Banking Group in September.

‘I requested a re-mark’

Scarlett Murray, 18, needed all As to secure a place on her dream course – English literature at the University of Bristol - but got a B in English literature.

I was completely shocked by my exam results. I’d got an A* in the mock exam, and had worked extremely hard. I knew all the set texts almost religiously. I hadn’t had a sense of anything going wrong in the exam.

My immediate thought was that I wasn’t good enough at English to study at university. But my English teacher encouraged me to get a re-mark – he said he never thought we would be having this conversation.

The day my new grade came through was my birthday, 23 August. My English teacher phoned me and I screamed for joy; it was an A*. To anyone else in my situation, I’d say, if you have any doubt at all about your mark, get it re-marked. This is not the time to be modest about your own aptitude. I’m now really enjoying English at Bristol.

‘I opted for more exams’

Before the start of year 12, Cynthia Royer, now 20, didn't know what to study at A-level.

I knew I really wanted to go to uni, but that was it,” says Royer. “I didn’t know what to study and my school barely had any information about applications.” So she opted for courses she’d enjoyed at GCSE: English literature and geography A-levels, plus a music BTEC.

“I quickly realised the third option is clearing - the matchmaking hotline that pairs students looking for a course with unis that have places available.

The first thing to do is call up your university to check if they’ll still let you in. If not, talk to your teachers. If you just missed a grade by a few marks, they may say it’s worth requesting a re-mark (now called a “review”).

If your exams results are too low for a specific course you really want to be on, resits might be an option – and demand a lot of time, and possible tuition costs mount up – and demand a lot of time, and possible tuition costs mount up.

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If you missed out on the place you wanted by just one grade, you may want to go for a “review” (previously called a re-mark). If you get a “priority review” and your grade goes up, you should still have time to persuade the university to admit you in September/October 2018, or request a re-mark – that fee is refunded if you get marked up.

Opinion

Plan A hasn’t worked, but you have options

Barrie Clark, head of UK student recruitment, Swansea University

If you’ve missed out on your place at university, you have some quick decisions to make. Talk over your options with your school or college – they’ll have helped lots of people in your position.

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“Think about resitting exams, or trying new subjects”

Another option is clearing – the range of vacancies on Ucas’ website is massive. Phone the units that interest you to check out their live vacancies and whether you’re qualified, and to talk to somebody about the course. Try to visit the university you’re going to to get a feel for visitors from 17-22 August so students can make sure it feels like the right place for them.

If your grades haven’t opened up enough opportunities for you, think about subjects, or trying new subjects. If you have a specific university and course in mind for 2019 entry, ring them up to check they’ll still make you an offer with results, and what grades they’ll want.

The important thing to remember is that even if Plan A hasn’t worked out, but you have alternatives, you can still go to university, study a great degree and have a fantastic time in the process, before going on to success in your chosen career.
Horses for courses: how to talk your way into your ideal degree

Take a second to relax before you pick up the phone, and have your key details - UCAS clearing number, confirmed exam results, exam board, clearing course(s) you're interested in, and personal statement - to hand. Any offers will be sent through on email initially so make sure you can provide an email address that can be easily spelled out and is to the point - this isn't the time to be using i88tStudying@gmail.com.

Be polite, enthusiastic and prepared to sell yourself - talk about your qualifications, your academic interests, and any relevant work experience or extra-curricular activities. Don't read out your personal statement - it won't sound natural, however hard you try - but some of what you've written can serve as a prompt to explain why you deserve a seat in their lecture theatre.

The clearing hotline is also a good chance to find out more about a course you could be spending three or more years on. Ask as many relevant questions as you can. How are students examined? How is your main academic interest covered? Is there a work placement or an opportunity to study abroad? What accommodation options are still available? Are there any open days for clearing applicants? If you're offered a place, what is the deadline for acceptance?

If you don't get an offer, you may want to ask if there are any other courses you could be considered for. And if you do get an offer, congratulations - but remember this decision will affect the rest of your life, and you don't have to respond during the call. Unless you're certain the course is an ideal fit, it's worth contacting other universities, to see if better opportunities present themselves.

Choosing your course

Make me an offer I can't refuse

What do you want from your university years? Focus on five key considerations to unearth the clearing gems and avoid the turkeys, says Lucy Tobin, head of clearing at Kingston University, who secured her own uni place through clearing, says that accepting a place on a joint honours course can be a route to landing your dream, via a strategic switching of your course. “Some courses offer transfer options after a year, so check what can and cannot be done,” she says.

Be wary, though: not all joint honours courses are 50-50 splits, so make sure enough attention is devoted to your favourite topic. Some students - those who are feeling a bit down – fail to ask enough questions. Remember: it’s as much about the university being right for you as being right for it.

Or how about a course that includes a year working in industry, or studying abroad, to make your CV stand out?

If you're stuck between two academic passions, can you find a clearing course that combines them? These joint honours degrees can be a foot in the door of departments that are otherwise full up.

Study with the size of the classes, and the latest graduate employment statistics. Think of clearing as a two-way matchmaking process to securing your ideal uni course.

Top tips

Horses for courses: how to talk your way into your ideal degree

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Step into a career in nursing

Debbie Andalouzi reveals why more students should consider a future in the nursing profession.

I f you want unrivalled flexibility and the daily satisfaction that comes from changing people’s lives, consider a nursing degree. “The biggest reward of being a nurse is being able to give something back. It’s about the privilege of being able to step into somebody’s life at a time of joy or crisis and really make a difference,” says Prof Lisa Bayliss-Pratt, director of nursing at Health Education England, which oversees workforce development in the English health service.

Graduate nurses can expect to find a job immediately, as a nursing degree has one of the highest employability rates of all degrees. Nursing is also increasingly becoming a career of choice for school-leavers. Last year, more 18-year-olds than ever before were accepted onto nursing degrees in England, according to analysis by UCAS, but many more student nurses are still needed. Across the age groups, most applicants were offered their first choice of university, but a record 13.7% found a place through clearing.

“Nursing can offer so many career choices, both nationally and internationally. The world really is your oyster,” says Bayliss-Pratt. And advanced clinical practitioner nurse Anissa Hichri, who works alongside GPs in an out-of-hours service and lectures at Sheffield Hallam University, adds: “There are so many opportunities to diversify – whatever time I am at in my life, there will always be a way to manage my personal life and my career.”

‘People are attracted to the diversity of roles’

Find out more information about careers in nursing at healthcareers.nhs.uk/knowsobuting

Optional font

The graduate nurse

Charlotte Learnes, 24, qualified last year as a mental health nurse and works at Netherton’s Healthcare NHS Foundation trust.

“I became a mum at 17 and had postnatal depression. I wanted to make myself feel better and didn’t just want to take tablets, so I did a community mental health course and just got hooked. I’d also always admired nurses, what they did and how they carried themselves, so I joined an access to nursing course and was supported to get onto a degree programme. I say the first in my family to go to university, but there was a lot of support and people helping me.

“At university I did a wide range of placements and in terms of experience and with the support I had, I felt confident I had the skills I needed when I graduated. When I finished my degree I was offered four jobs. In fact, I was offered my first job when I did my first placement, as there was such a need for more nurses and so many opportunities to get into the profession.

“I work on a ward for children and adolescents with mental health issues such as depression or low mood. It’s challenging, but there is quite a lot of therapy time with patients, too, such as days out or going shopping. I love my job, it’s really rewarding, because I can see that I am making a difference to people’s lives. It can feel like I’m helping to make sure people are ok.”

Many of the people answering clearing calls will be volunteers who have been through it themselves. They’ve got some advice, and some stories to tell...

Helena Pozniiak meets them

One of the first rules of clearing is that your mum can’t phone up for you. And she certainly shouldn’t impersonate you. “I had one strange experience,” says Monique Lucas, a student volunteer on St George’s, University of London’s clearing hotline. “After I explained to the mum that her child had to call, I’m fairly sure she went off, and then pretended to be her own son. It was surreal.”

At Loughborough University, one parent even offered a “parental donation” as they pleaded for a place. Bribery, universities are keen to point out, doesn’t work.

Clearing is a busy, emotional and occasionally uplifting time. Like many universities, St George’s fills rooms with scores of trained volunteers on results day – many of whom are students who have been through the process themselves. “Our day began around six in the morning, with breakfast provided,” says Lucas, who answered calls to the medicine hotline – the university had kept some places back for students with better-than-expected grades. “The phones were constantly ringing from 7am until 7pm – I’d lose my voice by the end.”

Universities report receiving several thousand calls over results period. Some students plead, some are tearful, and some ring before they’ve even received their A-level results. Others try to negotiate. “I’ve spoken to students who thought they personally had authority to alter the requirements,” says Lucas, who, like many volunteers, found her place (on a biomedical science course) through clearing. ‘We’re there to communicate the courses that are available and for each one we have a range of grades that we can accept,” says Nikhil Patel, a learning and teaching project officer at the University of Roehampton.

Patel came through clearing to study biological science at Roehampton, graduating in 2016. “Callers worry they won’t find a place, they won’t go with their friends, or that this spells the end of their career. They can be really scared and nervous. But you use your experience to help others. It callers want to know more about course specifics, we can arrange for them to speak to an academic.”

‘There’s a great community feel in the hotline room, says Marjorie Tang, a master’s student at the University of Derby who’s helped out twice in clearing. “Everyone wants to help.”

She remembers a woman inquiring about a nursing course. “She kept saying: ‘I really want to get in, please give me a chance.’ It was heart-wrenching to hear. I tried to keep her calm. Having gone through the process myself, I’m so grateful I was given a chance. Even though it feels stressful, most students end up finding the right course. It’s a great feeling knowing you can support them.”

Phoneline feedback

‘Callers can be scared and nervous. But you use your own experience of clearing to help’

Have your personal statement to hand, and be prepared to explain any lower marks. Know something about any new course or university you are contacting, and say why you’re interested.

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A mid the glamour for clearing places, students tend to focus on just getting into university, rather than on how to pay for it. A student loan is the most cost-effective method for many, as repayments are a portion of earnings and outstanding debt is written off after 30 years. UK students coming through clearing apply for loans the same way as other students – through Student Finance England as the equivalent body in their country. But switching courses may affect your application – where you live while studying affects your maintenance loan, for example.

So, it’s essential to update your application, to avoid delays. “Beginning uni without money for food, travel or rent can be frightening,” says Joe Woolway, senior financial support officer at the University of Sheffield. Yearly tuition fees for UK and EU students studying in England are capped at £9,250. Loans cover the full cost and are paid directly to the student’s bank account.

The amount you get depends on household income; below £25,000 and you are eligible for the maximum loan. If above that threshold, the size of loan is calculated on a sliding scale. The government’s online calculator to estimate how much funding you’ll get. In addition, universities often provide plentiful financial aid. Sheffield awards bursaries of up to £1,500, for example, based partly on household earnings. “Having extra finance helped me through the hard times – when I’d spent too much at the start of semester and been short at the end,” says Rosie Opinuadu, a 19-year-old psychology student at the university.

A part-time job can be a nice little earner. Chloe Batter, 20, an English student, was paid by the University of Warwick to help with open days and other events, “They’re one-off jobs, so they don’t get in the way of my exams,” she says. “And they look good on my CV. ”

Seb Murray has some pointers

University life is a blast – but it doesn’t come cheap. How will you keep the bank from running dry? Good university budgeting is part common sense, part inside information.

Top tips

Keep the wolf from the door

Student loans and repayments

£11,354

The maximum maintenance loan for 2018/19, if you live away from home in London

£8,700

The maximum if you live away from home but outside the capital

£7,324

The maximum maintenance loan for students living at home

£9,963

The maximum maintenance loan for students living and studying abroad for a year as part of a UK course

£37

The monthly repayment for someone earning £30,000

3.4% – 9%

The amount of interest English or Welsh students beginning courses this year will pay back is capped at 9% of income over £25,000

Apply for a student bank account with a large interest-free overdraft to save on overdraft charges. Nationwide, HSBC and Barclays currently offer students overdrafts of up to £3,000 (by the third year).

Sign up for a NUS extra card for a huge range of discounts, including 10% off at Co-op and 25% off at Odeons. It costs £32 for three years.

Buy textbooks second hand on eBay, or borrow them from the university library.

Get a 16-25 Railcard for £70 and enjoy one-third off train fares in Britain.

Avoid credit cards if possible. They can give you flexibility, but interest payments may put pressure on an already stretched budget.

Check your bank balance regularly to avoid running into arrears. Buy food with your flatmates and cook at home. It’s cheaper than a night out and you’ll learn a thing or two in the kitchen.

Don’t forget to apply for council tax exemption – if everyone in your household is a full-time student.

Review utility bills, such as heating and water; shop around to see if you can find a cheaper deal.

Get a free mobile app to help you save. Chip, for example, works out how much money you could save, and deposits money into a savings account automatically.

A few shortcuts for maximising your moolah

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esults day shocks aren’t always nasty ones. If you’ve done better than expected, and your grades exceed your firm choice, you can register for Ucas adjustment – which enables you to trade up universities or courses. If you researched a particular university but didn’t get it or are thinking of applying to university again, consider the Ucas adjustment route. “We’ll want to know: ‘Why our university, why this particular course, why aren’t you sticking with your conditional firm choice?’” says Helen Theme, director of external relations at Ucas.

The number of students finding a place in clearing in 2017 rose 3.1% to 66,865, compared with 63,890 students who accepted university places overall last year. It has become a more popular route to a degree than ever – largely thanks to the rising number of students who applied post-results were older students, this route also appeals to young people who have done better than expected in their exams and want to apply straight away,” says Thorne. The number of students using Ucas adjustment, which allows you to trade up universities if you do better than expected, was 1,040 – slightly up on the 980 who used it the previous year. While you’re unlikely to find places in clearing for some of the most sought-after subjects, some universities do hold back spaces on top courses for students who do better than expected. Last year, engineering, law, science and business places were all available via clearing; nearly 9,500 students found a place on a business-related degree this way.

Although three quarters of the students who used clearing successfully did so because they didn’t get the grades for their main and insurance choice, the rest had chosen to make their initial application via clearing. Nearly 17,000 students took this path last year – a year-on-year increase of 14%, or more than 2,100 students. “Although many who applied post-results were older students, this route also appeals to young people who have done better than expected in their exams and want to apply straight away,” says Thorne. The number of students using Ucas adjustment, which allows you to trade up universities if you do better than expected, was 1,040 – slightly up on the 980 who used it the previous year. While you’re unlikely to find places in clearing for some of the most sought-after subjects, some universities do hold back spaces on top courses for students who do better than expected. Last year, engineering, law, science and business places were all available via clearing; nearly 9,500 students found a place on a business-related degree this way.

More than a last chance salon
The range of courses gets broader, and many are making clearing their first choice, says Helena Pozniak

Although more than three quarters of students applying to university manage to get in at first choice, a record number of students found a university place through clearing last year. “This summer we expect most universities and colleges to be offering clearing places, and there will be opportunities across the full range of subject choices,” says Helen Theme, director of external relations at Ucas. The number of students finding a place in clearing in 2017 rose 3.1% to 66,865, compared with 63,890 students who accepted university places overall last year. It has become a more popular route to a degree than ever – largely thanks to the rising number of students waiting until early July to apply for the first time to university directly through clearing.

Although three quarters of the students who used clearing successfully did so because they didn’t get the grades for their main and insurance choice, the rest had chosen to make their initial application via clearing. Nearly 17,000 students took this path last year – a year-on-year increase of 14%, or more than 2,100 students. “Although many who applied post-results were older students, this route also appeals to young people who have done better than expected in their exams and want to apply straight away,” says Thorne. The number of students using Ucas adjustment, which allows you to trade up universities if you do better than expected, was 1,040 – slightly up on the 980 who used it the previous year. While you’re unlikely to find places in clearing for some of the most sought-after subjects, some universities do hold back spaces on top courses for students who do better than expected. Last year, engineering, law, science and business places were all available via clearing; nearly 9,500 students found a place on a business-related degree this way.

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Learning that your grades were not good enough for your first and second choice uni is a blow – and it is natural to feel down on results day. But, after that initial disappointment, you can come back stronger.

The three students we speak to here all secured places through clearing, and none has regretted the decision. Quite the opposite. They believe you should see clearing as an opportunity to reconsider where you want to go and what you want to study.

Some, knowing the exams had gone badly, did some research beforehand to see what courses still had vacancies and drew up a shortlist of possible universities. With the support of their teachers on results day, they were able to secure a place at a university of their choice despite having lower grades than those advertised. Others waited and considered offers from universities a few days later. Now all prefer their changed course or new uni.

Their advice? Don’t panic and persevere through the initial disappointment of not getting your university choices. And in a final word of advice, they say don’t be put off by universities will be flexible there’s a good chance that they say don’t be put off by your university choices.

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“Persevere through the disappointment”

Alphonso Brown, 21, from Croydon, has just finished a BA in acting at Plymouth University.

I never imagined myself needing to go through clearing. When I started my last year at sixth form, I was on course for a triple-distinction star in a diploma in performing arts. I was enjoying my lessons, I had a great relationship with my teachers, and I was growing ever more confident in my craft. I’d applied to five theatre schools and universities. That was January. By April, I had been kicked out of college, following an altercation with another student.

Although I was reinstated, I was rejected from the theatre schools and universities, as I didn’t get through the auditions.

I can only stress how important it is to persevere through the initial disappointment of not getting your preferred university. I still got the triple-distinction star, and I ended up with two offers from clearing. I chose Plymouth University as I thought it would be better for me. Audition was via Skype one Sunday afternoon.

I am now working for the Beyond Face Youth Theatre company in Plymouth. My advice to anyone in a similar position to mine is to go through clearing: there are so many universities out there that could be a lot better than the one you wanted. I have no idea what life would be like had I not been brave enough to go through it, and I am grateful that I will never know, because the experiences and people I have met at university have been priceless.

“Even though I knew I hadn’t done very well, I was still shocked at my results’

Rebecca Tevin, 19, from the Isle of Wight, has just finished her first year at Swansea University.

I wanted to study biochemistry at Bath University but knew after I had taken my A levels that I probably wouldn’t get the grades I needed for that – three As. For my insurance choice, I needed ABB, but I had been through a bit of a hard time at sixth form, as a result of a messy breakup, and probably missed a couple of months of college.

Even though I knew I hadn’t done very well, I was still shocked at my results – three Cs. I really thought I would get a B in maths. I had looked at which universities had places before results day, and I just went to my chemistry teacher who I was close to. He recommended I apply to Swansea. I never used to be Wales, I didn’t have a clue where Swansea was – but we rang them up and they accepted me. It was just such a relief to have got in somewhere.

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Andrew Rigby, 19, from Largs, Scotland, has just finished his second year in multimedia journalism at the University of Wolverhampton.

I applied to do sports journalism at the University of the West of Scotland and needed three Bs and a C in my Scottish Higher. I had had a great summer – but when I read my results (two Bs, one C and one D), my whole world collapsed around me.

My parents were devastated for me, but my mum got me up and together we logged back in to apply for clearing on the University of the West of Scotland and applied for my chosen university had been withdrawn was tough to take. As well as applying for clearing, I contacted a couple of colleges and thought about doing a journalism diploma. I felt I wasn’t good enough to go to university.

There was light at the end of the tunnel, though, and even today I cannot believe how quickly things changed. I was sitting in a restaurant in Glasgow with my family when, out of nowhere, someone from the University of Wolverhampton rang me.

He explained that Ucas had been in contact with them through clearing and that they would like to offer me a place for multimedia journalism.

I have no idea what life would be like had I not been brave enough to go through it, and I am grateful that I will never know, because the experiences and people I have met at university have been priceless.

‘How quickly things changed’

I had never been to Wolverhampton, but I accepted the offer straight away when I had read a little bit more about the course and the university and how great it all looked.

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Snapchat isn’t just good for sending customised selfies, and one of the women there said: “You need to go out with the university is sound, to ensure the contract you put in place through. But in clearing, response time is key, and for something important you need to be able to talk to someone quickly and get an answer quickly. Social media provides an easy way of doing it, and hopefully takes some of the pressure off.

Stephen Welsh, undergraduate marketing manager at Northumbria University

We still really feel that being able to speak to a member of staff, either on the phone or face-to-face, is the best way for prospective students to find out about the institution and courses on offer. It means they can ensure the student is making the right choice. We’ve seen in many areas of life there is a movement towards the use of instant chat functions, but we feel that at present this is not quite right for the clearing process. Every student’s situation is unique and so the conversations they have when they call are all different. That is not to say it isn’t something which could be used in future – clearing has changed so much over the past five years, and the landscape could look very different in another five years.

Richard Easeman, admissions manager at Pearson College London

It’s a difficult time to help you, whether it’s through WhatsApp or Facebook, and one of the women there said: “You need to go to get out of life now!”

I tried a few different jobs, but didn’t get on with any of them. Then my sister got married last August, and one of the women there said: “You need to go out and find yourself, go back to university or go travelling, figure out what you want.”

I took the weekend to figure out what interested me, thinking about whether travelling was right. Then I looked at a few universities local to the east Midlands, the courses that were left through clearing, and what I thought I would be able to do with the qualifications I already had. That’s when I decided education studies would be the best thing for me.

I looked at the available courses and decided to ring up the universities, but when the clearing lines were open I was at work, from 9am to 6pm, so I messaged through WhatsApp asking for advice. DM’d I said I could apply through WhatsApp – we went through general information like my name and age, the course I was interested in, and the grades I had previously.

They said that from the conversation we’d had they could give me an informal offer, but that I had to do the Ucas application and send it over within 24 hours so they could send it to the faculty and get my offer made formal. I had an email back from them within the normal offer in it.

I was surprised to be offered a place through WhatsApp, but it was great, as I only had 15 minutes

I decided education studies because it was what I felt I’d been working toward for years. Social media made it easier, I had a reply within minutes and the whole process took half an hour. My advice to other students applying through clearing would be: don’t hold back, if it’s really what you want to do, your university will find a way to help you, whether it’s through WhatsApp or another platform.
Parental support

How can we help?

Adulthood is just around the corner, but for now, as they tackle clearing, your children need calm, non-judgmental support, says Gavan Naden.  

Results day can be a nerve-racking experience if things don’t go your child’s way, but parents should try to not get swept up in the emotion. Take three deep breaths, set your face to neutral and, most importantly, keep listening to your child. This is when they need you most.

If your son or daughter hasn’t achieved the marks required for automatic entry to their first or second Ucas choice, they can apply to other universities through clearing – and your support could be vital to their success.

Don’t panic and don’t be overbearing – if things don’t go your child’s way, but parents can be a fantastic opportunity to find a more appropriate course and better fit for your child.

Don’t see clearing as a threat, advises parents to be proactive and get lots of information to cover the “what if” scenarios. “Do your research and planning. Being proactive doesn’t mean nagging your son or daughter for information. Historically, clearing has been associated with people rushing for places, but in reality there are thousands of spaces available.

One of the most helpful things you can do as a parent is to make sure your child stays calm. Although it may not feel like it at the time, clearing can be a fantastic opportunity to find a more appropriate course and better fit for your child.

Jamie Bradford, school and college recruitment and enquiries manager at De Montfort University, advises parents to be proactive and get lots of information to cover the “what if” scenarios. “Do your research and planning. Being proactive doesn’t mean nagging your son or daughter for information. Historically, clearing has been associated with people rushing for places, but in reality there are thousands of spaces available.

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Your university digs can be the difference between loving your new life and not, says Lucy Jolin.

Unlikely friendships forged over supermarket own-brand vodka and burned pizza – they’re part of the university rite of passage for most students. So it’s no surprise that one of the biggest worries for clearing students is that they may have lost out on their place in halls. But it’s not necessarily the case; lots offer guaranteed accommodation to everyone – including clearing students. And even if that’s not the case, there are still plenty of ways to make sure you have a memorable student experience.

Liz Carlile, head of admissions at the University of Sheffield, recommends that students start thinking about accommodation early. If having a guaranteed place in halls is likely to become the deciding factor, it’s best to know which universities offer that assurance. Most universities run open days over the summer, or offer virtual tours of their halls of residence, so you can get a feel for where you may end up living – and social media can be a useful and frank source of feedback from former students.

Alastair Reekie, head of accommodation at Northumbria University, suggests students approach their university once they have their offer, to ask what support is available. Most universities have WhatsApp and Facebook groups to get the ball rolling with future flatmates before term starts.

Even if an institution guarantees accommodation, as Northumbria does, private halls can be worth looking at, although Reekie offers a word of caution: “They may offer great deals and facilities, but our recommendation is to book via the university accommodation team. We work with partners in the private market, and ensure that students are placed with fellow Northumbria students and have access to all of the social elements and support mechanisms.”

If your university doesn’t offer that service, there are websites to help you find rooms in private halls and flatshares, as well as connect with other students. These include mystudenthalls, RightMove Students and StuRents. Your students’ union may also organise meet-and-greet events, such as speed flaming; call to find out what’s available.

If you do end up away from campus, in a non-student flatshare or at home with your parents, don’t worry. “We’re very aware that coming to university is a big transition for people, so we spend a lot of time making sure we provide an environment where people can get to know each other,” Carlile says. Events that ensure everyone feels included in the student experience are a big part of this; sign up with your uni to receive the latest information on this.
Time for a rethink

Nadia Rafiq had been heading for a computer science place, until clearing gave her time to change tack. Interview by Rachel Hall

I didn’t expect to go through clearing – I don’t think anyone does – but I did prepare a few days before so I knew what I was doing. I had a list of the degrees I wanted to do, and the UCAS numbers I was going to need. I then, on the day, I just went straight into it and started calling as soon as clearing started.

I called a couple of the Russell Group universities – King’s and Queen Mary – and there was a really long wait. When I did get to speak to someone, they were quite abrupt – if you don’t have the grades, they straightaway end the call. It was quite disheartening. Other universities were better – they understand that it’s clearing and you’re going to be upset.

When I rang Pearson College in London, they said I basically had a spot on business management with global industries – I just had to do a phone interview with one of the heads as a formality. Straight after that, I got a place. I was really happy because it was the first place I’d been offered; the others were taking their time replying.

In the end, I was offered places at four other units, but when I looked at the courses in more detail, I decided to go for Pearson, because of the internships they offer – it seemed more hands-on than my other options. Afterwards, I felt much happier that I’d gone through clearing, because I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have enjoyed the degree I originally applied to do – computer science. I’m now studying business management with marketing, having swapped from the course I was initially offered a place on. Originally I hadn’t known what I wanted to study, so I fell into it when I was searching through UCas, but the extra time I had before clearing helped me decide.

I already lived in London so accommodation wasn’t a problem – I’ve been staying at home. Although one of my original choices was Lancaster, I decided I’d rather not move at all; it’s much easier this way, as I’m still paying for accommodation, and I’m not one for living out. I think it’s been as easy for me to settle into university as the other students.

Originally I hadn’t known what I wanted to do, I fell into it’
Students often feel under pressure to make a snap decision on a clearing place, but how do you choose the right one? It’s not all about the course – the university and its location will also have a bearing on how much you enjoy the coming years. An open day is your opportunity to get to know your potential new homes, and make an educated choice between them.

Many universities run open days specifically for clearing students – typically in August, after a frantic A-level results day. Southampton Solent University’s is on 18 August, for example, but you can drop by informally throughout this week. “You can meet current students, tour campus, find accommodation and learn more about your course and financial aid,” says recruitment events and prospects manager Rebecca Hollington. “Choosing a university is a big life decision, so make sure it’s the right fit.”

You should check out the university’s website to book an open day place online, or call their clearing hotline.

Hannah Guy, 20, visited the University of Portsmouth on the day she found out she hadn’t got the required grades for her first-choice university. “A lecturer talked me through the layout of the course, I found out about student societies and got to know the city,” she says. She accepted a place on Portsmouth’s law degree on her journey home to Bristol. “Clearing was stressful, so the open day took the edge off.”

John O’Reilly attended open days at eight different universities before he enrolled in Solent’s computer games art degree in 2016. He worked as a student ambassador for Solent on clearing open days. The 21-year-old says planning is vital in a positive experience. “Open days can be crazy busy, so it’s best to know exactly how you’re going to get to the university and what you want to do on the day. Prepare questions for course instructors beforehand to make the most of the opportunity to grill them in person.”

You’re choosing a new home – so you’ll want the lowdown on the course, the university and the city. That’s where open days come in, says Seb Murray.

Your turn to ask the questions

Open days

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Open day tips

Snoop around, enjoy the vibe

- Explore the city or town. It will give you a feel for your potential new home. "You won’t just be studying at university, so make sure you’re happy with the local amenities," says Sophie Dear, head of marketing and campaigns at the University of Portsmouth.

- Sell yourself. An open day is not just an opportunity to assess the university – it could also be the first time you meet potential tutors. "It’s a two-way conversation." Dear says.

- Bring a parent, sibling or friend. Don’t pick a place based on gut instinct - get a second opinion. "Having another viewpoint is extremely helpful. You have extra moral support and they might think of questions you didn’t think to ask," says Guy, who brought her parents on her open day to Bristol.

- Enquire about financial aid. Many clearing students are unaware of the generous scholarships and bursaries that may be on offer, as they will have had little communication with the university. "Coming from a slightly disadvantaged background, it was important for me to know that I could afford to come to Solent before I accepted the offers," says O’Heily.

- Snoop around halls. As a clearing student, you don’t have much time to find and secure accommodation before your course starts, so use the open day to decide where you want to live. "It can be daunting to move away from home, especially for the first time," says Rebecca Helsington, recruitment events and prospects manager at Southampton Solent University. "Our residence team will help you start your search for accommodation on the open day."

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- Snoop around halls. As a clearing student, you don’t have much time to find and secure accommodation before your course starts, so use the open day to decide where you want to live. "It can be daunting to move away from home, especially for the first time," says Rebecca Helsington, recruitment events and prospects manager at Southampton Solent University. "Our residence team will help you start your search for accommodation on the open day."

- Explore the STEM labs. As a clearing student, you don’t have much time to find and secure accommodation before your course starts, so use the open day to decide where you want to live. "It can be daunting to move away from home, especially for the first time," says Rebecca Helsington, recruitment events and prospects manager at Southampton Solent University. "Our residence team will help you start your search for accommodation on the open day."

- Sell yourself. An open day is not just an opportunity to assess the university – it could also be the first time you meet potential tutors. "It’s a two-way conversation." Dear says.

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Amatey Doku, NUS vice-president for higher education

‘A taste of all that university offers’

Today, more people than ever before are securing university places via clearing and, despite the trebling of tuition fees since 2006, to £9,250, the number of students obtaining higher education first degrees, such as a bachelor’s, has risen by nearly one-quarter over the past decade or so. But young people face many challenges, which can make attending university difficult. It is, for instance, widely believed millennials will be worse off financially than their parents, and less likely to own their own homes. That places pressure on students to go to university to get a qualification that will make them eligible for a good job.

Certainly, there are advantages to going to university, especially for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and may be the first in their family to enter higher education. Although many UK universities are research-intensive, higher education today is a hugely diverse sector, full of vocational courses that set people up for the workplace. Some are at the cutting edge of digital learning, and teach students valuable technology skills, for example.

But the university experience is much broader than what goes on in the classroom – for some, university is an opportunity to leave home for the first time and build new friendships and relationships. It’s vital that you take advantage of the many extracurricular experiences on offer during the course of your studies. As well as being enjoyable, these activities can make you more attractive to employers.

In my role as vice-president for higher education at the National Union of Students, I travel around the country, seeing what students get up to. The experiences are endless – huge numbers are taking part in sports teams and student-run societies, which are absolutely key to the university experience. Lons of students also benefit from travelling abroad and taking advantage of the Erasmus exchange scheme. Others are doing placement years, sometimes as officers in their students’ union.

The best way to get a taste of all that university offers is to attend an open day. Financial constraints can limit people from visiting campuses, but where possible you should - to get a sense of whether the institution, the course and the environment is right for you. One thing most students want from university is a sense of belonging, but some people don’t feel like they fit in – and this could be one reason for the attainment (grade) gap between some BAME and disadvantaged students, and their white or more privileged peers. An open day will help to ensure you feel at home.

To make the most of an open day, you should speak to students and representatives from the local students’ union, which is often involved in the running of open days. They should tell you what it’s really like to study there – something you cannot always get from flashy course brochures. They will be honest and could tell you why a course is – or, more importantly, is not – right for you. Ask about the teaching methods used on the degree to ensure a fit with your learning style.

Checking that the course, campus and wider city or town match your expectations can make the crucial decision of where to study much easier.
Beyond the uni-verse

So you want to do a degree, but you don’t want to do it at university? Lucy Jolin checks out some alternative ways to study

Foundation degrees

These can be full- or part-time, and they’re usually related to a particular field of work. They tend to be a mixture of practical workplace and classroom learning – and you can “top up” to a full degree after you’ve completed the foundation level. If you don’t have the qualifications needed for a traditional degree, then a foundation degree is ideal: although they all have slightly different entry requirements, one or two A-levels or equivalent vocational qualifications are the norm. You still have to pay, but fees tend to be lower than traditional degrees – and you can earn while you learn if your employer is paying, or study part-time.

“These are really viable ways directly into employment,” says Kirsti Lord, deputy chief executive at the Association of Colleges (AoC). “They are potentially enabling people to step into a job that’s incredibly well paid – such as in engineering or construction – without accruing three years of higher education debt.”

Degrees at FE colleges

Some FE colleges, such as Truro and Penwith College in Cornwall, also offer undergraduate degrees. Although tuition fees are likely to be the same as university fees, these colleges may have other advantages if they’re local to you: you can live at home while studying, and courses are often more tailored towards the needs of the local area.

“In 2016-2017, there were 1,670 degree-level apprenticeship starts, covering professions as diverse as legal services, banking and engineering.”

Degree apprenticeships

These are offered by employers, usually in partnership with a training provider, such as a university or further education (FE) college. You’ll end up with a degree, and you’ll earn money while you get it. Many degree apprenticeships also offer a job at the end. “What’s so perfect about the management apprenticeship is that you can work and get on-the-job experience, but still get the qualification of a degree and professional accreditation,” says Alam Sadiku, who is currently working as a chartered development manager in premier banking at Barclays UK. He’s doing his chartered manager degree apprenticeship (CMDA) with Anglia Ruskin University. “These kinds of programmes make you mature very quickly,” he adds. “It’s tough, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

Private universities

If you want to study at a university but don’t want to go through the UCAS system, consider a private university, where you apply directly. Some of these universities, such as the University of Buckingham (which also offers two-year degrees) or the American University in London, offer a range of subjects, while others, such as the University of Law, focus on a specific sector.

In 2016-2017, there were 1,670 degree-level apprenticeship starts, covering professions as diverse as legal services, banking and engineering.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES
Universe is not the only option

As technology advances, online learning becomes more effective and attractive, says Lucy Jolin.

Not sure what you want to do at uni? Want to get into the workplace and earn some cash while you top up your qualifications? The development of online learning and part-time courses means you’ve got plenty of options to learn 24/7, wherever you may be.

And if you found school difficult, you might even find that online learning suits your particular learning style better than sitting in a classroom. “With online portals, flexible mentoring and group sessions, and the ability to access information anytime from anywhere on smart devices, learning has become more about each individual,” says Fay Gibbin, CEO on training provider BB Training Academy.

MOOCs – massive open online courses – are great if you’re not sure what to study and want to “try before you buy”. To get a flavour of how MOOCs work, sign up for free at the Open University’s futurelearn.com platform. You’ll be offered hundreds of MOOCs covering a vast range of subjects, from human anatomy to animation, and developed with partners spanning everyone from the European University Institute to the National Film and Television School. Taking your study beyond the introduction may cost, however.

If you want to stick to getting a degree, there are plenty of universities that offer online undergraduate degree options. The University of London has a range of courses that you can study for independently, all backed up with academic support and direction from relevant universities. On the University of London’s Business and management BSc, for example — which is aimed at students interested in careers in finance, and is developed by the London School of Economics — you can receive support from institutions in 16 different countries.

At the University of Derby, you’ll find a huge variety of online courses for undergraduates, taking in everything from accounting to psychology. Many of these subjects are also offered as shorter modules or certificates, such as the sports psychology certificate of credit, which is worth 10 credits and typically takes 10 weeks studying part-time.

And at Arden University, students can choose from two approaches: online learning, where the whole course is completed online; or blended learning, where students spend a couple of sessions a week in study centres in Manchester, London and Birmingham.

In short, online learning offers the best of both worlds, says Craig Robinson, director of learning and teaching at Edinburgh Business School. “It can be a cost-effective way of developing core knowledge and skills, achieving qualifications and progressing in your career.”

I can employ between 50 and 70 people for a production, and I don’t know any of their qualifications. I know their experience. I can list the shows they’ve worked on. But I don’t know if they went to university — because that doesn’t matter to me. What matters is what you bring to the table. Experience from a certain country, a company, a genre? A technical skill? What are you bringing that adds value? None of that has anything to do with getting a degree.

Of course, you need a degree for some professions — nobody is saying doctors or lawyers shouldn’t have them. But I believe you have to look at your path. Apprenticeships and internships, for example, are so valuable, because you learn from people who are doing it. Plus, you’re making money, rather than going into debt. Many employers — including me — would prefer to have someone who has the experience and common sense to execute something in the right way, to make the company money, rather than a degree that might not be relevant to the job. I’m an executive producer and there’s no degree for that. Nothing could have prepared me for the challenges I faced.

But if you choose not to go to uni, you’ve got a surefire way to make yourself more appealing. How are you going to spend those three years when everyone else is off getting their piece of paper? Have you going to get your foot in the door? You need to actively think about that. Think about how you’re going to make those connections, get that experience. And be excited about that experience. And be excited about what you’re doing. I don’t care how old you are, or what you’ve done — if there’s your excited and enthusiastic, then I’ll want to work with you.

Find your own path

Filmmaker and producer Josh Wilson, 27, left college at 18. He worked in sales and marketing, and doing a degree in business and finance, and is developed by the London School of Economics — you can receive support from institutions in 16 different countries.

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Of course, you need a degree for some professions — nobody is saying doctors or lawyers shouldn’t have them. But I believe you have to look at your own career path and what’s relevant to you. There’s a belief that you can’t be successful if you don’t go to uni, and that’s absolutely not the case. There are so many alternatives.
Find the right university and course

Each year Whatuni helps thousands of students across the UK find the right university and course.

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- Independent Expert Advice: Whatuni provides tips on clearing, career advice, information about open days, key information about universities and guidance for students and parents.

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WHAT UNI?

Taking a gap year

‘Step back, gain some perspective’

Exams, exams ... are you ready for a break? Time volunteering overseas will be a confidence-building adventure, says Suzanne Bearne

A six-month stint working and travelling around Australia or three months volunteering on a sea turtles conservation programme in Costa Rica? With so many options available, deciding what to do when you’ve deferred university for a year can be both fun and exhausting; so begin by knocking down in some research. Start by talking to those around you. Maybe your uncle is a seasoned backpacker who can regale you with stories of travelling around Europe before the internet took off, or your older sister took an internship that enabled her to get on a graduate scheme.

Failing first-hand accounts, the internet is a great research tool – but be warned, you might end up down a rabbit hole. Dedicated websites such as gapyear.com are full of inspiring ideas and stories, while the websites for gap year providers will try to lure you in with colourful details of their programmes.

If you’re on a budget, travelling off season and to cheaper places – think Laos over Las Vegas – will make your money go further. Dave Owen, deputy editor of gapyear.com, recommends planning your budget before you leave. “Work out exactly how much money you have and how long it needs to last. From there you can work out a basic daily budget. Draw up an itinerary of attractions, tours and activities you consider essential, and how much these will cost. Chances are you’ll always spend a little more than planned, so budget for that too.”

After her A-levels, Becca Law spent a year working as a waitress, saving up to spend a month volunteering on the media team with the Scout Association in Japan and China. “While I was interviewing and helping produce videos for the YouTube channel, I met people from all sorts of countries all over the world,” says Law, now a third-year history student at the University of Hull. “It boosted my confidence, and it meant that when I arrived at uni on my own, I wasn’t afraid to open up my bedroom door and go and meet people.”

Emma Beynon, marketing manager at gap-year provider Bunac, agrees that a gap year can provide valuable skills. “It’s an opportunity to step back, gain a wider perspective on life, learn more about yourself, and think carefully about your future education and career choices, as well as a chance to make friends from different backgrounds and cultures.”

She says students typically return feeling refreshed, confident, independent and ready to focus on their studies with renewed enthusiasm. “Many find the transition to university much easier after a gap year – they have already experienced life away from home and have a newfound confidence that they can take care of themselves.”

Top tips

Good gapping starts here

1. Plan ahead
   - Forming a loose plan of where you intend to go, and what visas you might need will help you feel more relaxed and prepared.

2. Take out travel insurance
   - Whether you’re skiing or bungee jumping, you’ll want to have comprehensive travel insurance that covers you for any activities.

3. Pack the minimum
   - You may want to include five types of footwear, but when you’re trying to find a hostel in searing heat, you’ll be thankful for a trimmed-down wardrobe on your back.

4. Keep in touch with parents
   - Give them a loose itinerary and send regular updates while you’re on the road.
Suzanne Bearne

**Join our club**

If you've already got a hobby, there's a society catering for it. If you haven't, now's the time to experiment, says Suzanne Bearne

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**Every week is fancy dress week**

There's certainly no other time in your life where you'll be expected to don fancy dress on such a regular basis. Whether it's dressing up as something beginning with the letter A or as a fictional character, whatever club or society you're part of, there'll be some kind of imposed fancy dress code. Save money by sharing your outfits with your housemates.

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**Learn to unicycle**

Jumping out on a unicycle today is more in vogue than you might think. And if basic self-balancing seems a tad too easy, you could really challenge yourself by combining it with playing hockey or basketball.

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**Jump out of a plane**

Instead of spending your weekends nursing a hangover in bed, why not be a bit more vertical and enjoy free-falling 15,000 feet out of a plane instead? Once you've learnt to skydive solo, you can start competing against other universities in the Skydiving Nationals. Holidays can take on a new dimension, as competing against universities.

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**Volunteer work**

*It shows that you are interested in the world*

Volunteering unlocks a new dimension of experience, says Suzanne Bearne.

I may have only been for three weeks but for Giffie Toinepe, 20, a volunteering programme last summer – helping disadvantaged children in Guatemala – was transformative. “It helped me learn to be more vocal and it inspired me to continue working with children,” says the Nottingham Trent psychology student, who is now learning Spanish. “I believe my volunteering experience helped me get the job I have now, as a support worker for a child with learning difficulties.”

Volunteering not only makes a huge difference to a community, but it can provide many personal benefits too, such as the opportunity to meet people from all types of backgrounds. Plus, as university can be stressful at times, devoting part of your week to helping others can improve your wellbeing and perspective, as well as helping to develop skills such as listening, time-management and multitasking.

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**Volunteering**

Fancy giving up an evening per week to take a disadvantaged child out to the cinema? Or spend Wednesdays working in a charity shop? From teamwork to timekeeping, volunteering will certainly help develop your skillset. It also tells employers something about your personality and values.

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**Launch your own business**

Starting your own company while at university can not only help bring in extra money, but also cultivate useful skills for your future, such as negotiation and money management.

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**Activism**

Universities have long been the breeding ground for activism. If there's a cause you're passionate about – whether it's fighting against tuition fees, or promoting fair trade – getting involved at uni can help create contacts, as well as sowing the seeds of a future career path.
No need to suffer in silence

The transition to university is drastic – and not everyone sails through it. That’s why university mental health support systems are second to none, says Kim Thomas.

At the beginning of his second year at Loughborough University, Rahul Mathasing started struggling. His moods were becoming darker, his motivation disappeared and he started missing lectures. He approached the university medical centre, which referred him to the local NHS community mental health team. His pattern of behaviour – manic episodes in which he couldn’t concentrate or sleep, as well as episodes of very low moods – led to a diagnosis, in February 2015, of bipolar disorder.

The systems engineering student, who continues to see a psychiatrist and is on medication to treat his disorder, had help from the students’ union, the medical centre and his department which gave him a leave of absence. “They’ve done everything they can to help me get to a level I’m happy with.”

Students can be more stressed and anxious than other young people. “You don’t have family around you, necessarily, and you are probably having a massive shift in your support systems,” says Micha Frazer-Carroll, welfare and rights officer at the University of Cambridge students’ union.

So what support is available? If you already have a diagnosed mental health condition before you start university, Lisa Brooks-Lewis, mental health manager at Loughborough University, advises registering with a GP, and nominating a parent or guardian the university can talk to if necessary. If you develop a mental health problem once there, the first port of call should be your GP, who will be able to refer you to appropriate specialist support. Talk to a member of your department, such as your personal tutor, too, says Brooks-Lewis. “The sooner we are able to support somebody the better the outcome will be in their studies.”

Many universities also have wellbeing advisers, to whom you can turn if you’re feeling homesick, or having difficulties with your course or with relationships; counsellors, who will offer more in-depth support for personal problems; and mental health advisers or co-ordinators, who can help with practical issues, such as extra time for exams. If you’d like support from your peers, you can contact Nightline, a night-time telephone support service staffed by student volunteers.

Self-care is important. Make sure you’re getting enough sleep and eating proper meals, rather than snacking or relying on takeaways - and don’t drink too much.

If you have an existing mental health condition, disclose it before you start, so your university can prepare to offer you the support you need. You may also qualify for a disabled student allowance.

If you think you have a serious mental health problem, go to your GP as soon as you can – don’t hope it will just go away.

For help, you can contact Samaritans in the UK on 116 123 or by emailing jo@samaritans.org. You can contact the mental health charity Mind by calling 0300 123 3393 or visiting mind.org.uk

‘The sooner we are able to support somebody the better the outcome’
A spent force? How to make your money last at university

New experiences abound at uni. Master your budget to keep affording them, says Kim Thomas.

The university years are when most teenagers get their first taste of being responsible for their own finances – and it can be pretty exciting to see a £2,500 loan drop into your bank account. “It just seems like an endless pot of wonderfulness,” says Kim Thomas, student money advice manager at Anglia Ruskin University. But it isn’t, of course – it has to last you at least three months.

Most of the financial problems she and her colleagues see are caused by overspending. So, what do you do if you find yourself running into trouble – and is there a way of avoiding problems in the first place?

Manley says the first step is to choose somewhere to live that is within your means – an ordinary room in halls rather than, say, a swish studio flat – as accommodation will eat up a big chunk of your finances.

Always set up a student bank account and, if necessary, make use of the free overdraft facilities – some offer a free overdraft of up to £2,000. Regard it as a way of managing your cash flow, advises Manley, rather than an excuse for getting into debt.

Make sure that you’re receiving all the money you’re entitled to. A number of universities offer scholarships and bursaries, particularly for poorer students, so check what your university offers. If you do run into trouble, go and see one of your university’s money advisers sooner rather than later. Your university may well have a fund to support students in their learning. For example, Manley says if your laptop breaks down, or you need to go on a field trip, your uni may give you the money to cover the cost. Most universities also have separate hardship funds for students needing emergency support.

On a day-to-day basis, however, there is no substitute for making a realistic budget.

“Look at what you’ve got to spend, then work out how much is left, and if you think you’re not going to be very good at managing that, just work out a weekly amount that you’re allowed to spend and don’t go over that,” says Manley.

If you’re planning on getting a credit card for your university years, try keeping a log of every time you spend money over a fortnight, says Manley, so you’re not living on the never never. “It’s all too easy to overspend on takeaways and fast food. Don’t go to the coffee shop every day – you can’t afford it,” says Manley. “Bring in sandwiches. And don’t eat out, or order takeaways and fast food. Make sure that you’re receiving all the money you’re entitled to. A number of universities offer scholarships and bursaries, particularly for poorer students, so check what your university offers. If you do run into trouble, go and see one of your university’s money advisers sooner rather than later.”

University of York

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Funding

Rosie Tressler, Student Minds

Focus on wellbeing

The transition to university is exciting, but brings potential challenges: leaving friends and family, sharing living space with strangers; working independently and managing your personal finances. Because 75% of mental health difficulties start before the age of 24, taking care of your mental wellbeing is integral to making the most of university life.

At Student Minds, we’d like to see a greater degree of mental health literacy – it isn’t usually taught in schools, so students don’t always know the difference between normal everyday emotions and a problem they need to seek support or treatment for. We believe it’s really important for students to learn to focus on their own health and wellbeing – students often have their own answers to problems, but they don’t realise it.

Simple things such as getting enough sleep, taking exercise and talking to friends are a good starting point. You don’t need to join in with the stereotypical party lifestyle at university if you don’t want to – sports, volunteering and student societies will help you meet like-minded people.

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If you have a pre-existing mental health condition, and are receiving NHS treatment for it, ask for your notes to be transferred to your new GP as soon as possible. When you arrive at university, contact a mental health adviser through student services, who will be able to coordinate support for you and help make sure you receive any adjustments you need.

Check your university’s website to see what support is available: most will offer counselling or other types of therapy, as well as mental health advisers and personal tutors. More specialist support, for conditions such as eating disorders, is provided by the NHS, although we would like to see joint responsibility between the NHS and universities for student mental health. You might find that you don’t click with the first professional you see, but don’t give up – try another. There are also national support services and phone lines.

We welcome the growth in peer support, now offered by a number of universities – there is real value in someone being able to speak to a student at a Student Minds group who’s been through similar experiences. It’s also good to see some universities working with students to decide what mental health services to offer. There are now more than 2.3 million young people at university – it’s important to make sure they have both access to excellent health services and health-promoting cultures and communities. Student Minds, the UK’s student mental health charity, recently launched online resources to help students through the transition from school and college to university.

Rosie Tressler was interviewed by Kim Thomas.
The art of True stories ‘box-ticking chore’ education isn’t just a course and seeing that gain from her doing a that her children Natalie Andrews feels I food on the table. essential – without it I would not The student loan has been work and making enough money. to school and getting enough than the logistics of getting kids juggling act. But it works. I have two children, a daughter of 14 and a son of 12, so my life is a busy life, squeezing a fine art degree into her parenting and work commitments. Interview by Liz Lightfoot I live by my diary. I feel guilty if I have nothing to do. I have to be productive. I work part-time as a gallery invigilator, curating the space for artists, and I have two children, a daughter of 14 and a son of 12, so my life is a juggling act. But it works. For me, the degree is bigger than the logistics of getting kids to school and getting enough work and making enough money. The student loan has been essential – without it I would not be able to buy materials and put food on the table.

Art has always been in my life. After school, I did a foundation course at St Martin’s in London, but then I had my children and stopped studying, even though I continued to make art – even if it was just elaborate costumes for school plays!

When they started school, I tried studying for a fine art degree at Goldsmiths in London, but it didn’t work logistically, because I wanted to be able to take my children to school and spend enough time with them – and be in the studio.

Now they are older and I have the student loan, it is much easier. I feel my children gain from it as well, because they see that education isn’t just a chore, ticking boxes and getting the right exam results, but something that enriches your life. My degree is challenging me and making me happy, and they see that. It’s possible to find a studio and make art on your own, but what I gain massively from the university is access to lecturers who are practising artists, and to a whole community of people I respect who push me and challenge me and give honest feedback. There are other mature students on my course [fine art at the University of Bedfordshire] and I don’t feel we stick out at all. And the 18-year-olds don’t treat us differently to anyone else. We are united by what we have in common, and that is a very positive thing for me.

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Mature students A mature decision

The transformational benefits of a university education aren’t just for the young, says Liz Lightfoot

A university degree can transform your life at any age, and each year thousands of mature students enrol on degree courses. For some, it is a second chance for the education they missed out on in their youth. For others, it can be an opportunity to further a passion or interest in the company of like-minded enthusiasts, or change career tack.

Clearing is popular with mature students who are less likely to have been helped by schools and colleges to meet the earlier deadlines. Universities keen to fill their places advertise their courses throughout the summer and last year direct entries in August and September were up by 4% on 2016. Of the 16,910 people accepted at university last year after applying directly through clearing, over a third, 67%, were aged 20 or over.

You can register for the first time with UCAS right up to the end of clearing on 30 October and it’s a good time to speak to universities and get advice through their clearing hotlines.

Student loans are open to people of any age taking their first undergraduate qualification. “Student loans are fantastic because you pay them back only when you are earning enough,” says recent law graduate Adam Dark, now in his 40s. “But three years is a long time to take out of paid work, so you have to live carefully.”

“Back in 2011, I was 39 and not doing very much, just bouncing from one dead-end job to another, or unemployed, sitting on my sad little bed watching daytime television. I realised I needed a change.”

“I chose Canterbury Christ Church University because it was my nearest, and found myself in lectures with 100 or so 18-year-olds. They were there to have a good time, and I was on a mission, but it was fine,” says Dark, who now teaches law at CATS Canterbury school. “Getting a degree was life-changing. People say it is just a piece of paper but it is not. Employers take it seriously, they give you work and money – and money gives you opportunity.”

At Anglia Ruskin University in East Anglia, where a third of students are over 25, and two-thirds are over 21, career progression for older students is stressed. “We encourage students very early on to think about their career plans,” says Sarah Janes, its deputy director of student services. “Mature students may worry about being with a lot of 18-year-olds, but we have a real diversity here. There will be people like you, too, and others who will help you broaden your outlook.”

Art has always been in my life. After school, I did a foundation course at St Martin’s in London, but then I had my children and stopped studying, even though I continued to make art – even if it was just elaborate costumes for school plays!

When they started school, I tried studying for a fine art degree at Goldsmiths in London, but it didn’t work logistically, because I wanted to be able to take my children to school and spend enough time with them – and be in the studio.

Now they are older and I have the student loan, it is much easier. I feel my children gain from it as well, because they see that education isn’t just a chore, ticking boxes and getting the right exam results, but something that enriches your life. My degree is challenging me and making me happy, and they see that. It’s possible to find a studio and make art on your own, but what I gain massively from the university is access to lecturers who are practising artists, and to a whole community of people I respect who push me and challenge me and give honest feedback. There are other mature students on my course [fine art at the University of Bedfordshire] and I don’t feel we stick out at all. And the 18-year-olds don’t treat us differently to anyone else. We are united by what we have in common, and that is a very positive thing for me.
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Don’t go overboard with the essentials

Chances are you’ll have less space than at home, so be ruthless, says Gavan Naden

Leaving home for university is an exciting time, but trying to compress your entire wardrobe, along with a crate of lager and a fancy dress outfit, into your new room can be a tall task.

Here’s a rule of thumb: if it doesn’t fit into the boot of your parent’s car, it’s unlikely to find a home in your room.

Ron Bentley, whose youngest child, Suzie, is now at Liverpool University says: “Make sure they go with a sense of humour and enough cash to buy a takeaway or two. And leave in good time, in case you get lost.”

De Montfort University student president Jessica Okwuonu says that while going to university can be a life-changing experience, it’s also important to concentrate on comfort and familiarity. And just because your room may be a little on the snug side, doesn’t mean you can’t make it special with a few finishing touches.

“Bring items from home that you care about and make you feel good. Personally I can’t do without my fairy lights, “ she says. “Take duvets and pillows and bedding, “ she adds. “I went for the colourful, vibrant ones, as it was the first time I had a say in what my room would look like. Primark has amazing bedding, and it’s cheap!”

As most rooms in halls of residence are compact don’t even think about bringing a pet. (It has been done, hamsters and goldfish most commonly – or back in the day Lord Byron reportedly took a bear to Trinity College, Cambridge.)

And remember that you won’t be the only one in the kitchen. “Don’t go overboard with the essentials,” says Okwuonu. “I thought I was going to be the Jamie Oliver of my class, but a lot went to charity because I never used them. Got a few pans and cutlery. Or go halves with your flatmates”

A week or so before departure it’s worth joining the other freshers and taking the obligatory trip round a department store to grab a few essential items.

Rosie Vega, vice-president of activities at the University of Hertfordshire, suggests buying colour-coded cutlery and plates: “You can tell which are yours at the end of the year – whereas everyone else brings white plates and hasn’t a clue.”

But she cautions against kettles, toaster and microwaves, and especially candles. Most are supplied and in the case of candles – not advised because of the fire risk.

Her top advice? “A printer is really useful, even though they are available at uni in the library. And maybe a subscription to Netflix for when you want a bit of alone time.”

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Checlist

- Bedding and pillows, maybe even a topper for the bed. After all, you’ll be needing your beauty sleep.
- A laptop and a memory stick – so you can write essays and coursework, and ensure they are backed up.
- Your mobile - with enough minutes to phone home, or apps to make free calls on wifi.
- A folder with all your personal documents, including bank details, passport etc.
- A printer and paper – to save time queuing in the library.
- A box of kitchen essentials – tins, pasta and rice – plus a simple cookbook. Better still, go armed with two or three simple recipes and the route to the local supermarket.
- A small luxury, maybe your favourite teddy, or a poster of your team – less likely a photo of your mum and dad.
- Books, writing pads, pens and a calendar. It’s good to know where you need to be on any given day the old-fashioned way.
Learn to cook

Make a meal of it

Don’t Deliveroo. Mastering a few simple recipes could be the difference between a healthier lifestyle and a swollen overdraft, says Gavan Naden

The joy of cooking may not be at the forefront of a fresher’s mind – but that day will surely come. Faced with yet another round of beans on toast, the allure of fresh food will suddenly become more enticing.

And reverting to constant takeaways doesn’t help. All the MSG in the world can’t mask the nasty taste of a rapidly diminishing bank balance. It’s no longer a case of can’t cook, won’t cook – it’s must cook, better learn. So take a deep breath, learn a couple of home cook, won’t cook – it’s must cook, better learn. So take a deep breath, learn a couple of home

Tasty meals and save a fortune by rehearsing the leftovers. It’s usually better value to buy larger amounts of an ingredient at once rather than buying extra portions. Wasted food is wasted money.

Mushroom and spinach lasagne

1 tbsp olive oil
1 garlic clove, crushed
2 tbsp sprigs of thyme
200g bag spinach
350g tub light soft cheese
4 tbsp grated parmesan
6 fresh lasagne sheets

Heat oil in a frying pan, throw in the garlic, chopped mushrooms and thyme, and they soften. Mix in spinach until the leaves wilt. Remove from heat and stir in soft cheese. 1 tbsp of the parmesan and season. Put a quarter of the mix in a medium-sized baking dish and cover with 2 pasta sheets; repeat this process until all the pasta is used. Finish with the last of the spinach mix, and sprinkle over the remaining parmesan. Bake for 35 mins at 200C/gas mark 6 until golden.

Jacket potato with veg

Potato
Olive oil
Onion
Mushrooms
Pepper

Pick a potato with a fork and coat in microwave for 10 minutes, or in the oven at 200C for an hour. Cut up the peppers, onions, mushrooms and courgette and fry in a pan, in a little oil. Cut open potato and stuff with mix.

Three quick and easy recipes

Roast potatoes and sausages

Splash of cooking oil
2-3 medium potatoes, cut into 6 sausages
1 onion, cut into six
Salt and pepper

Preheat the oven to 200C/180C fan oven/gas mark 6. Oil the baking tray and throw the potatoes, sausages and onions. Roll the food in the oil. Season well. Put in the oven for 30 minutes, then carefully turn things over, so they brown on the other side. Cook for a further 20 minutes. Serve with baked beans.

Money saving tips

Make the money last

From making your own wraps to picking up secondhand text books, there are plenty of ways to make your money go further at university. Gavan Naden tightens his belt

Living on a student loan might not lend itself to organic extravagance, but with a bit of careful budgeting you can still have a great time and dodge the Pot Noodles. The important thing is to plan. Work out what’s essential and how often you can afford to go out. You could even create a spreadsheet that divides your money up into weekly chunks, so no nasty surprises come your way. Don’t be alarmed if you’re spending more than your weekly budget suggests you should in the first few weeks of term, as you’ll be jointing clubs, having a few drinks during ‘freshers’ week and stocking up on food. But bargains and savings are there to be had, especially if you’re prepared to share. “Get in contact with the people you are sharing with beforehand and not only will you get to know them, but you can decide who buys what,” says Sophia Milnes, Leeds Trinity’s student recruitment and outreach manager. “Divvy up pot and pans, cheese graters – it will save you a lot of money.”

Food is a major expense so be prepared to shop around. Sarah Widdows, a design student from Arts University Bournemouth recommends making your own lunch. “The £3 hinch deal – a sandwich, crisps and a drink – sounds like a good one, but it soon adds up. Take your own food to university. Go to the supermarket and buy some tortilla wraps, then fill them with stuff like salad, cheese or eggs, and it will cost around £1 a day. That’s a £40 monthly saving.”

Books can also be a major expense, so make good use of the library, or buy them second hand from students in the year above. Then there’s student railcards which at £70 for three years will save a third off rail travel in the UK. And a good student card, or ‘student’ bus pass can be a bargain. For example, the NUS extra card, for £12 a year. This little beauty will unlock discounts at The Co-op, ASDA, Pizza Express, Odeon cinemas and many other retailers.

True stories

How I live on a student budget

Tarik Crooks - chemical engineering undergraduate, University of Manchester

When I was younger my mum bought everything, so it was a big thing realising how much basic stuff like toilet paper and toothpaste cost.

My parents had a chat with me, as I guess they didn’t want me coming back every other week asking for money. But it’s one thing hearing the facts from your parents, and it’s another having money dropped in your account at the beginning of term. It’s so easy to spend when you don’t have anyone telling you not to buy stuff.

My biggest expenditure is food and going out. I spend between £20 and £30 a week on food. In my first year, I went to Sainsbury’s as that’s where my parents go, but I found it’s better to go to cheaper shops like Aldi and Lidl. They have own-label stuff for a fraction of the price and it knocks at least £5 of my weekly shop.

I try to enjoy things in moderation, so I go out at least once a weekend and do something like the cinema. I joined the uni gym at the start of term and because it was near my birthday I asked my parents if they’d buy it as a birthday present. That saved a bit. And I also get a year bus pass immediately, as it’s a big expenditure.

I do tutoring in maths and all three sciences during term time. It’s quite well paid and flexible and doesn’t take up too much time. I also get summer work so I can go on holiday with friends to Europe. You can get a good deal if you book far enough in advance. My advice would be don’t treat your overdraft as free money. I know people who have gone out and bought loads of clothes then found themselves £1,500 overdrawn and wondering how it happened.

‘I do tutoring in term time. It’s quite well paid and doesn’t take up too much time’
What do admissions tutors want?

Show resilience and individuality, says Helena Pozniak

‘We don’t want students who say the same things,’ says Helen Basterra, head of admissions at the University of Brighton. ‘A good university community is made up of different types of people with different experiences. It’s important to be yourself.’

Admissions officers might speak to hundreds of students during clearing, and typically spend between five and 15 minutes speaking to each candidate. ‘But an ‘accept or reject’ decision is never, ever taken lightly,’ says Laura Justham, an admissions tutor and senior lecturer at Loughborough University.

What do tutors at the end of a phoneline want to hear? ‘We ask them: “Why this uni, why this programme?” We need to hear you have a genuine interest,’ says Justham. At the very least, tutors want to know the student has looked at the key course details on the university website, and understands how it differs from all the other courses with the same title.

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