



MAKING THE MOVE
TO UNIVERSITY



FOREWORD



Foreword by Liz Fraser,
Writer and Broadcaster

The most challenging times in our lives are usually those of change. Starting school, moving to a new job, starting a family, and so on.

One of the biggest is leaving home. Making that enormous leap from child to young adult; from living at home to being almost fully independent and having to figure out how a washing machine works. And how life works.

Unsurprisingly, even the most outwardly confident, self-assured and street-smart 18-year-old can sometimes find things tricky, and many struggle far more with it than they, or their parents, might have imagined.

The first year of my university life was a knock-out emotional cocktail of excited, happy, terrified, lonely, sad, confused, determined, elated, and hopeless. I really nailed it.

25 years on, and as a mother with one daughter at university already, one on her way this year and two children still to go further down the family line, I have now also lived through this transition phase as a parent, and watched my children (and many of their friends, whom I've known since they were in nursery) make the leap from home to university.

It's really struck me how much the world has changed, how much social and emotional pressure they feel under, what new worries daily life throws at them, and how differently they have fared.

It's made me realise just how much support they need, and how much more we need to do to understand the experiences our children are going through in this relentless, social-media obsessed, unpredictable world our children are moving into, to give them the best chance to make this giant leap... and land on their feet.

WHAT IS THE LEAP?

The transition from school to university is a bit like riding a bike without stabilisers for the first time.

As a suddenly independent student, you experience a heady mix of anticipation, excitement and anxiety.

As a parent, meanwhile, it's a moment when you have to let go and send your child off on their own, provoking conflicting feelings of pride and apprehension.

No one knows exactly how things will pan out, but that's part of the fun. It's this sense of opportunity and uncertainty that makes the transition to university such an important, pivotal life moment.

We call this moment '**The Leap**'.

For this short report, we have spoken to parents and prospective students across the UK to find out what they need and expect from student life and accommodation. It reveals some pronounced differences in their perceptions.

We've also drawn on the experience of our people, who spend their working lives looking after students from every imaginable background, and consulted a panel of recognised experts.

Their collective wisdom suggests that, given the right support and preparation, the vast majority of students have what it takes to not only make The Leap but find it a valuable, rewarding and memorable experience.

While we use research like this to continually improve the services we provide, we also hope the insights in this report will give students and parents helpful information to make The Leap the formative experience it should be.

81% of applicants are excited about going to university.

61% of applicants feel anxious about going to university.

Reality Check, 2017. Unite & Higher Education Policy Institute





GREAT EXPECTATIONS

We know most students adapt to the realities of university life, but sometimes the freedom and excitement that university life promises can obscure the more challenging realities of living independently for the first time.

First year students often arrive at university expecting to find friends for life and endless parties interrupted by the occasional inspiring lecture.

As a result, they may be disappointed with the mundanities of doing the washing up (every time, no excuses) and the complexities of navigating communal living whilst studying for a degree.

'With the excitement of starting University life, students do not necessarily consider the consequences of splashing their cash. After all, for most this is the first time in their lives that they are responsible for their own money and are in charge of how they spend it. Regardless of whether this money is spent rightly or wrongly, the money is spent.'

Tim Bodenham, Founder,
BAM Student Marketing

"Anyone at any stage can feel vulnerable in a new environment, and for young people leaving home for the first time this can be particularly challenging. The change in routine, getting used to new housemates and the removal of potential boundaries associated with home life can all be contributing factors."

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook, sexual health & wellbeing for under 25s

GETTING READY FOR THE LEAP

We know that a lot of young people are apprehensive about the prospect of university living.

47% of 6th formers feel unprepared to live with people they've not met before.

Survey of 2,396 first year university students conducted for Unite Students in 2017

The Leap creates a perfect storm of practical challenges, and some argue that today's young people are less equipped to deal with the practicalities of managing their own lives than any previous generation.

Some are relatively independent when they arrive at university, able to deal with the basics and happy to have a go at new domestic tasks. Others may be underprepared, and grateful for a helping hand from sympathetic support staff or more experienced peers.

It seems that plenty of parents share their concern.

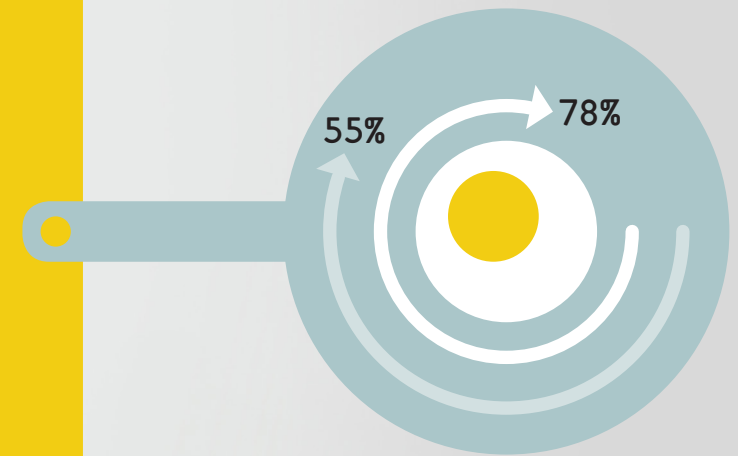
Only 55% of the parents of 16-19 year olds polled think that their child is able to cook a meal from scratch on their own.

Onepoll poll for Unite Students, 2018

But the prospect of a rocky road to domestic bliss doesn't seem to bother students much.

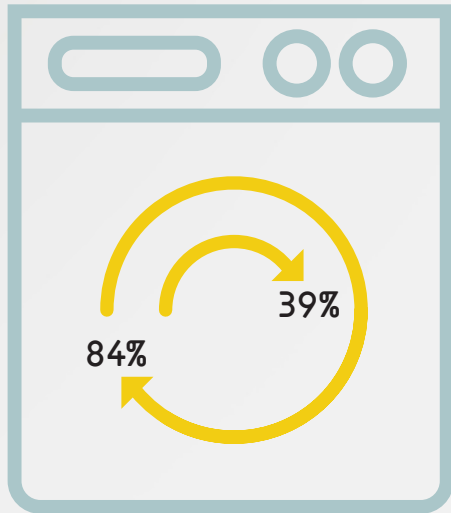
Less than a quarter (22%) of this age group feel confident about cooking a meal from scratch.

Youthsight poll for Unite Students, 2018



Only 55% of the parents of 16-19 year olds polled think that their child is able to cook a meal from scratch on their own, but over three-quarters [78%] of teenagers are confident they can do this.





39% of parents think their children won't wash their bedsheets more than once a month, but 84% of teenagers say they will.



Whatever the case, with a little support when needed, we know that most students rise to the challenge and, moreover, find it a fulfilling experience: developing the skills to look after yourself builds confidence, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility.

That's one of the reasons why the first weeks and months away from home are so important.

It's also clear that the reality of university life is often a far cry from students' expectations.

Fewer than one in ten students (9%) say their higher education experience closely matches their prior expectations.

Reality Check report, Unite Students and Higher Education Policy Institute, 2017

Getting ready for The Leap isn't rocket science, but it's important. And we know that, with the right support, the majority of young people navigate the pitfalls and challenges just fine, and that preparing properly can make a world of difference.

From a parent's perspective, being prepared largely comes down to the art of conversation – simply talking to teenagers (not always simple, we know).

As the countdown to independent living gets underway, many families might find that talking about shopping and bed sheets happens quite naturally.

66% of teenagers aged 16-19 have been given advice by their parents on practical life skills like cooking, cleaning and managing money.

Youthsight Poll for Unite Students, 2018

But it's the awkward chats covering tricky topics – sex, relationships, alcohol, drugs and mental wellbeing - that often seem to get missed, potentially creating problems further down the line.

Most teenagers aged 16-19 who expect to go to university say their parents haven't offered advice about sensitive topics. 77% haven't been given advice on sex or mental health, 72% on relationships, 66% on drugs and 58% on alcohol.

Youthsight Poll for Unite Students, 2018

Any unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment, so frank talks about every aspect of university life, good and bad, are a gift that will keep on giving, long after the excitement of Freshers' Week has faded.

We'd also like to spare a thought for the empty nesters who have to cope with the eerie silence and lack of trainers clogging up the hallway. They face a whole different set of challenges, but can take some comfort in knowing that their children might be sympathetic to the monumental adjustment their parents will have to make as they embark on their new lives.

"Students worry about how their parents will manage as much as parents worry about their children. It's important on both sides that they have trust and let go. I've had a lot of cups of tea with parents, reassuring them that their child is in safe hands! And their kids are always grateful their parents have driven away happy."

Sarah, Unite City Manager, London

Having witnessed thousands of drop offs, we know that there's a lot of emotion flying around on both sides, and have a simple recommendation for anyone contemplating The Leap:

"Definitely bring tissues. But you'd be amazed at how quickly the students adapt as soon as their parents drive away – they just get on with it."

Dom, Unite City Manager, Newcastle



SOCIAL LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS

Going to university means waving goodbye to the strict routines of school life and the safety net of a parent's watchful eye. For many first year students, this freedom holds huge promise.

88% of students place a higher priority on who they live with, rather than where they live.

Unite Student Insight Survey, 2017

However, the harsh realities of finding your place amongst hundreds of strangers and the tricky realities of testing your personal boundaries aren't so commonly thought about.

For most students, this gap between expectation and reality may mean no more than a bumpy start to the first term. But for some, the pressures that go hand in hand with the multitude of new social experiences can be demoralising and draining.

As in any new situation, some people find it easy to make friends and some don't.

"Don't be afraid of social situations. For the first few months, I only knew my flatmates because I didn't go out into the courtyard and speak to other people, but there are endless possibilities of who you can meet and what you can do. Also, don't forget to have some fun!"

Lara, 21, in her 4th year studying Korean at SOAS University of London, Unite Student Ambassador

And however confident they may appear, most students will feel anxious about who they will end up studying, socialising and living with.

Before coming to university, **81% of university applicants state they anticipate spending more time socialising than at school – the reality is that just 59% of all students agreed that they have a fuller social life than at school.**

Everyone In, Unite, 2017



The first weeks of term can be especially daunting for Freshers who may struggle with the sheer volume of new social situations they will inevitably face.

“At a social level, students need to develop empathy skills, become comfortable in social interaction situations and in how to perform in public situations. Above all they need to acquire good conversation skills.”

Dr. Harry Barry, author of 'Anxiety and Panic: How to reshape your anxious mind and brain'

Partying and sexual exploration is a perceived rite of passage for the majority of university students.

“There may be a desire to experiment with drink or drugs, or to invite new sexual partners back to your accommodation without knowing them well. Likewise, it may feel like there is pressure from peers to engage in any of these activities and you may lack the confidence to say no.”

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook

The key here is for students to be comfortable and confident with their own boundaries.

“It is natural to want to have fun and experiment at university, and exercise a new freedom with new people, however, it is important to recognise where the boundaries lie between fun and risk-taking behaviour.”

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook

While expectations of crazy nights may be sky high, the reality is that making friends isn't always easy, especially with those you end up living with.

Students who understand and are prepared for this are better able to stay positive and open to the opportunities that university life can offer.

“University is a great way to meet new people and start new relationships (if you want to). What all good relationships have in common is that they are based on respect, trust, and communication. That's true whether it's your relationship with your best friend, your teacher or your partner.”

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook

This view is shared by Unite Student Ambassadors, whose role is to provide peer-to-peer support and help first year students to adjust to life at university.

“Be yourself. It might be cliché to say, but people respect you for being who you are. The more confident you are in yourself, the more likely you are to be respected by other people.”

Lara, 21, in her 4th year studying Korean at SOAS University of London, Unite Student Ambassador

“It's easy to have a 'social mask' and make shallow relationships with people and act how you think they want you to act, but it won't go very far. You can build meaningful relationships at university that last a lifetime as long as you be yourself.”

Louis, 21, in his 4th year studying Banking and Finance at London Metropolitan University, Unite Student Ambassador

As with so many things in life, a well-timed conversation can do wonders, whether that's with fellow students or support staff in student accommodation.

Having a safe and secure environment with the space - and support when it's needed - to work out a way through challenges is an important factor in helping students to thrive during The Leap.

“Every year we welcome 50,000 students at check in. It's always memorable, and it's rewarding, making them feel comfortable and encouraging them to make new friends. Some need a bit more help and encouragement than others, but that's what great about it – they're all so different.”

Ed, Unite City Manager, Portsmouth

And for mums and dads that can't help but imagine their innocent children in colourful scenes of excess and debauchery, the advice is firm but fair:

“My message to parents? Let them get on with it. They're going to make mistakes and do their own thing, but they will be well looked after. What students need is somewhere that feels like home, where they have an increased measure of independence but they still feel safe. That's what we do.”

Chris, Unite City Manager, Liverpool

LOOKING AFTER THE PENNIES

For first year students, starting university also means starting a new life with an unprecedented degree of financial power and freedom.

Most students soon get to grips with money matters and hone their budgeting skills, but it can take time for some.

With student loans fresh in, it's all too easy to blow the budget on taxis, takeaways and 'recreational activities', not realising that the fast dwindling cash is supposed to last for the first term, not just the first month.

"With the excitement of starting University life, students do not necessarily consider the consequences of splashing their cash. After all, this is the first time in their lives that they are responsible for their own money and are in charge of how they spend it. Regardless of whether this money is spent rightly or wrongly, the money is spent."

Tim Bodenham
Founder, BAM Student Marketing

As with domestic skills, there's also a chance that students may overestimate their abilities.

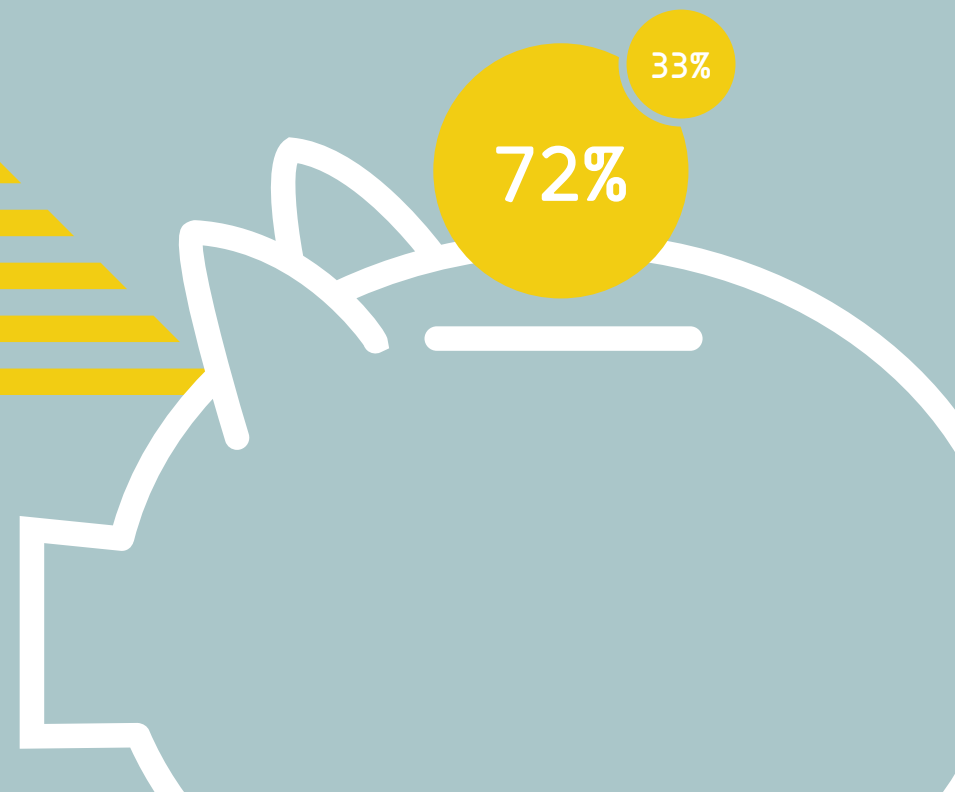
While 80% of teenagers aged 16-19 are confident they can manage their money, 78% didn't know the price of a pint of milk.

Youthsight poll for Unite Students, 2018

Parents, however, fully expect to receive a flurry of phone calls and texts when the cash machine eventually stops working...

Almost three quarters (72%) of the parents of 16-19 year olds polled think that it is likely that they will lend money to their children before the end of the first term – whereas only one in three (33%) children of this age think they'll need to borrow from their parents.

OnePoll and Youthsight polls for Unite Students, 2018



This isn't to say that students aren't affected by money worries. Just like the rest of us, fragile finances create stress and seriously disruptive practical problems.

“Financial Capability is important to the student experience to try to minimise some of these issues. This is ensuring that students have the tools to manage their money effectively, and especially when they are leaving home for the first time.”

Anita Bailey, National Association of Student Money Advisors (NASMA)

And there are interesting variations in how students deal with money that may be worth bearing in mind. According to Unite Students' Everyone In report, those who are the first in their family to go to university are more likely to experience financial difficulties during their time at university, with 47% of this group saying they find managing money stressful.

“Students rely solely, in some cases, on Student Finance and university scholarships or bursaries. These are paid in termly installments in most cases, meaning it takes a little getting used to, to make this money stretch, especially with monthly expenditures.”

Anita Bailey, NASMA

Financial literacy can take some time to master, but discussing the full range of financial obligations and sharing tips on managing and saving money before they leave home can help set students up for life at university and beyond.

“Parents can play a significant role in helping students leaving home to better understand and therefore manage their finances at university. This includes honest, open and realistic conversations about money, learning to manage expectations and also ensuring students know where to go for further help, advice and guidance.”

Anita Bailey, NASMA

“It's really important parents give their kids the chance to experience living independently whilst at home. Teaching them some basic cooking skills, showing them how to wash their clothes and having open and frank conversations about money and budgeting.”

Stephanie, Unite City Manager, London

Sometimes, however, nothing beats getting advice from someone who is already at the sharp end of making a student's income stretch from week to week.

“Don't be too spontaneous. If you plan ahead for nights out and events, you can save yourself a lot of money and manage your budget much better – it also helps you to attend more events.”

Louis, 21, in his 4th year studying Banking and Finance at London Metropolitan University, Unite Student Ambassador



WELLNESS & RESILIENCE

Change can be unsettling, and moving away from home for the first time is a major life event that can provoke a dizzying mix of contradictory emotions. Undoubtedly, it's an incredibly exciting and joyous time for students, but there is also a lot of anxiety around the logistics of this move.

"For most students, leaving home to enter university is a period of great stress."

Dr. Harry Barry, author of 'Anxiety and Panic: How to reshape your anxious mind and brain'

First year students are often determined to stand on their own two feet and prove to parents, their peers and themselves that they are ready to make The Leap.

This determination to 'succeed' can put them between a rock and a hard place as they may have expected to sail carefree through their first term, but find that the reality of the situation is a little more complicated.

And finding the discipline to juggle the competing demands of studying, partying and sleep without the familiar framework of family life can also catch first year students unawares.

"University might feel like a chaotic experience, especially in the first term."

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook





Mental health issues are one of the biggest reasons for people leaving university early, and according to research conducted for the Unite Students Insight Report, one in eight students and university applicants consider themselves to have a specific, named mental health condition.

“Many students lack the key skills necessary to adapt and manage the uncertain, unstructured world of college life, and the consequences can be devastating. Over a quarter may suffer from mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction and self-harm.”

Dr. Harry Barry, author of 'Emotional Resilience: How to safeguard your mental health'

Emotional resilience is a cornerstone of wellbeing, and leaving home is often the first time that students are forced to actively manage their mental health without the support of family and close friends.

“Students need to acquire techniques to deal with personal resilience skills such as how to develop unconditional self-acceptance, manage the physical symptoms of anxiety, learn how to cease procrastinating and catastrophising, challenge the evils of perfectionism, cope with the spectre of failure and its alter ego - success, and develop mindfulness and good problem-solving skills.”

Dr. Harry Barry, author of 'Emotional Resilience: How to safeguard your mental health'

It's important that those taking The Leap are given every chance to prepare themselves mentally and emotionally for university life, and are made fully aware that help is on hand should they need it.

Managing expectations and encouraging self-awareness and acceptance is incredibly helpful, as is discussing how and when to act if negative thoughts and feelings arise.

“It's really important to keep track of your own personal goals and recognise your own limits and boundaries, as well as being clued up about where to go if you need support.”

Laura Hannah, Education and Wellbeing Lead, Brook

Accepting the rough with the smooth and knowing in advance that not every day will be full of celebratory selfies is the best way to manage The Leap, and knowing that help is at hand is always reassuring.

“You don't have to live an Instagram lifestyle. You don't have to look immaculate all the time. If you have an issue or just need someone to talk to you can pop down to speak to us in your PJs if you need to, just like at home. We don't judge.”

Jo, Unite City Manager, Aberdeen

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging that it may take a little time to settle in and simply talking to the people around you is the quickest, most effective way of breaking down barriers and making sure university life is as fulfilling and as productive as possible.

Every year throughout the UK we welcome 50,000 students through our doors and help them setup a new home with us. Every year, these same students move on to the next adventure in their lives having tried new things, learned a lot and grown as human beings.

We know just how complicated and overwhelming The Leap can be and what it means in both students and their parents lives.

By offering the right support at the right time, we firmly believe that students will meet the challenges that university presents, and more than that, we believe they will thrive.



Credits

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