

PARENT AND CARER CASE STUDY

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As a parent, you spend your life keeping your children safe, making decisions for them and monitoring their every move, but when it comes to them going to university, you need to find that balance between knowing when to support and when to let go.



Choosing a university can be daunting, especially for a teenager; it's a huge decision that could be positively life-changing or an expensive mistake. Having the support of a parent or carer is vital from the offset to help navigate not only the academic choices, such as finding the right course and making an application, but also the practicalities of student finance, accommodation and living independently.

So, where do you start? We began with courses, and discussed what she might like to study. Something academic related to or a continuation of one of her A level subjects? A more practical, vocational course? Of course we talked about careers. What did she see herself doing in 5 or 10 years? Sitting down over several cups of tea and a laptop, browsing university websites, was a good way in. We found that the most relevant, focused and up-to-date course content and admissions information came from the university websites themselves, but the UCAS website was also helpful, with lots of information and videos for parents, carers and students about where and how to apply, the offer-making process and how student finance worked.

PARENT AND CARER CASE STUDY

Up next came ‘which uni’? Not too close, but not so far away that you can’t afford the train home for a weekend. We made a shortlist of potential universities and booked onto open days. These were without doubt the most influential and informative part of the decision-making process. Open days allowed us to visit each city and campus and explore the libraries, lecture and seminar rooms, IT suites, social spaces, accommodation and sports facilities. We wandered around the city centres and took public transport, to get an idea of what it would be like to live there. We got a ‘feel’ for each place and a wealth of information by attending the talks and mini lectures and chatting to tutors and current students about their personal experiences. By the end of each day, my daughter knew which ones were a right fit for her, both academically and personally. After we had visited each place, she then made her final list and submitted her UCAS application.

I was so proud that after all the hard work my daughter got the grades to be offered a place at her first-choice university; she has SEND and struggled with her mental health, and so overcoming these challenges to achieve her goal was amazing! However, alongside the excitement were also some worries – would she cope with living on her own? Would she make friends? Would she be able to manage her workload and get up and go to lectures without a nagging parent? Would she be able to access the academic support services she might need? But most importantly, would she be happy?

In the run up to moving day I calmed my own fears by organising the practical things such as buying essentials for her student room and teaching her to use the washing machine and cook a few basic meals – at least then I knew she wouldn’t go hungry!

I joined a parent/carers forum for her university and sought both practical advice and emotional support from other parents/carers. I found that if there was a question I didn’t know the answer to, such as when loan payments would be made, how to pay the rent

PARENT AND CARER CASE STUDY

in installments or if there was parking on campus there would always be someone who knew the answer. We also checked out where the nearest supermarkets were to her student flat, where she could get a bus, and safe walking routes to the university and gym. My fears gradually subsided.

We're now one term in. My daughter is happy and thriving. She loves her course and has had great support from her tutors. She's settled into her flat and has made friends for life. As a parent I've found it hard to let go, but unlike years ago, there's Facetime and WhatsApp to keep in daily contact and to support when things don't always go to plan.

Making the choice to go to university is one not to be taken lightly, but the benefits of higher education and the doors and career pathways it opens are impossible to ignore. Yes, it can be expensive and many parents may worry about the financial burden placed upon young people, but the experience and opportunities it offers are immense, not just in terms of earning potential and careers, but also in social and personal development. Going to university allows young people the opportunity to study and live independently, whilst being supported by their tutors and peers. In just a few months, my daughter has grown in confidence to become a mature, independent, organised and practical young person, ready to take on the world!