



Helping your offspring choose somewhere to study a degree is a period of emotional adjustment



Department for Education

Decisions, decisions... Make the right choice

Get your sixth form and uni choice right

SIXTH FORM

One of the toughest parts of choosing a sixth form for your teenager is how much say he or she should have. You will put a huge amount of energy into researching which has the best reputation, results and pastoral care, the most interesting extra-curricular activities, the highest number of university entrants - and the least flexible uniform policy. And your child will want to stay with her friends.

Talking things through on such possible conflicts is always the best strategy - unless you want to be footing the bills for therapy sessions well into his or her 20s. Remember - your child is more likely to study if he or she is happy, and they will be happier if they have had some say in the process.

So here are the questions the family will need to discuss:

Does your teenager have a career in mind - and if so, what degree or apprenticeship would it require? Remember, some schools don't do the AS levels which count towards getting enough points for a university course.

New subjects - anyone for politics, philosophy, or economics? Or sociology? After all, if you've got an "ology", you're a scientist. Universities do give Year 11 pupils taster sessions for these esoteric topics, which might be the best introduction for the more obscure modules, like macro-economic theory as it pertains to the state of Outer Mongolia.

Friends - it's great to have the comfort of being surrounded by buddies you already know. But it's just as good to make new ones. Pupils will change a huge amount during the two years of their A-levels, so some friendships will inevitably fall by the wayside.

Open Evenings - most schools have them, and they will give you an early chance to get a feel for the place. Try to find out from each one when they are and what they will cover. It is also the best place to hear from students who are currently on the courses a newbie wants to join.

Travel - how easy will it be for you to drop them within less than a few

hundred feet of the school gates? And are you happy for them to go on a train if the trip would add a frustrating, jam-packed hour to your car commute?

Drama - you don't have to be the next aspiring Judy Dench to need public speaking skills later in life. Being able to stand up on stage improves confidence and the ability to talk in public.

Let your teenager choose the subjects he or she loves (see reference to "being happy", above)

UNIVERSITY

You can still remember, all too clearly, your baby in nappies.

And now you are expected to send them out into the world, to university?

Helping your offspring choose somewhere to study a degree is a period of emotional adjustment - and if he or she is in the middle of A-levels now, it is best to get in early.

The key is research - you know, that thing that involves sitting for hours at a keyboard browsing for information about a geopolitics module on sheep farming in the Shetlands.

The more you know about a course, the more likely it is to fit. But it is also crucial to know about the city which is going to be home for the next three or four years.

One admissions tutor said: "My parents drove me to a university 160 miles away, bless them - but within half an hour I knew it was not for me. I had to pretend to be interested for the rest of the day."

"Some students say 'It just feels right'. If I knew what that meant, I would bottle it - but I know how they feel."

Visit, visit, visit. Investigate the university and the course, but also the ABCs: accommodation, buses, clubs - and the countryside. If rent is pricey, public transport is rubbish and there is no nightlife, it might not be the best place to call home. And can students escape easily into the green bits - you know, the dark areas between the night lights?

Look at all the course modules. Some parts of the course are going

to be a bit of a turn-off. Make sure you know which bits a student will enjoy and which they won't. And how much of the course is fascinating and how much is dull as Don-caster dishwasher.

Interview the tutors. If a student can have the courage to put lecturers on the spot about their courses, they will be impressed. Attack is the best form of defence. And tip: students are advised not to talk about their "passion" for the subject - tutors hear it so much, most of them hate it.

Interview current students. They will have the best take on the pros and cons of a course. Ask for a contact through the university or try contacting people on social media.

Work experience. It's a good idea to have a track record in a job closely related to the course subject. It shows commitment to the prospective course - but it might also help a student decide for sure if this is the career they want to follow. Also, look at the big companies in the city which will be a student's new home - they might like it so much they want to stay and work there after completing their degree.

The hotel of mum and dad. Staying at home ensures rent is cheap (or non-existent), travel there and back is very brief, a student has a support network and friends are still nearby. But beware - the newly independent teenager is unlikely to be able to leave a pile-up of dishes in the sink. And make sure it is the university the prospective student wants, not the one the parents want.

Friends. The buddies you make at university are likely to be friends for life, so they say. So students should not feel compelled to stay near to home or their school best friends. Plus, a word of warning - if they go to the same university as their boy/girlfriend, they need to ask themselves seriously what they would do if that relationship broke up in the first few months.

The hangover test. Could you jump out of bed at 8.30am, after a long boozy night out, to listen to a dull 50-year-old drone on about your subject? If the answer is yes, you are on the right course.

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