

Special Needs at University

While your child is at school or in further education, there are plenty of sources of help if they have any form of special needs. But what happens when they venture out into the uncharted territory of higher education? Are they lost without a map and, supposedly newly adult, left to fend for themselves? Or are people and facilities on hand to see them through what is often a difficult transition for even the hardest teenager?

Thankfully, in most universities, the latter is the case. All students will be assigned a personal tutor whose role is pastoral as well as academic. While said teacher's main remit is subject delivery, s/he can advise on educational dilemmas and refer any students with more complex requirements to the plethora of in-house professionals tasked with looking after student welfare and wellbeing.

Who are these staff and what is their brief? They usually wear the catch all guise of 'student services' and they are collectively there to ensure that your offspring are safe, secure and on track scholastically, emotionally, physically and professionally.

While departmental names and job titles may vary, typical designations are: counselling, student guidance, disability advice, learning support, accommodation, careers and employability, international officers, finance ...

The list, if not endless, is commodious and comprehensive. Possibly it doesn't give a full flavour of what the work entails: a disability adviser, for instance, could facilitate practical help such as assistive technology or provide ongoing one to one encouragement and back up for students with any kind of incapacity. 'Disability' is a broad church and whether it is physical –e.g. hearing impairment, dyslexia - or less readily apparent (such as autistic spectrum, mental health issues), the resources are in place. Generally there is a lot of collaboration and referral between these different specialists and if one individual or unit can't deliver, they'll know someone who can. For instance, a dyslexic student might need to liaise with both the disability co-ordinator and the learning resources section in order to maximise what's on offer.

Top tip

Once in situ at university students may also need reminding (by you?) that this kind of help is on hand. Whereas schools and colleges may keep a watchful eye on their charges, at university self-referral is very much the order of the day.

Where do you and yours can find out more? Initially through the prospectus and at open days, (including those set aside just for parents) and by email /phone contact with staff in the know. It's important to remember that these services are both free and confidential. So embarrassment, fear of failure or lack of funds should not prevent access - or achievement.

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