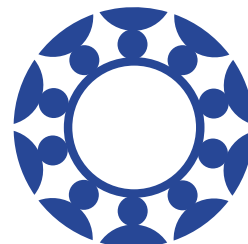# Changemakers – moving on

First hand experiences of student life

National Council
of Women GB

Since 1895

For a fair and inclusive society

Changemakers – moving on

Changemakers are, by definition, those who have the ability to assess a situation that seems to be unfair and unacceptable, and then join the ranks of those who campaign for a better alternative.

The National Council of Young Women (NCYW) helps those still at school to know more about issues that negatively impact women and girls, here and around the world.

"Moving on" is the way we all progress and develop, both physically, in knowledge and skills, and as a personality. Leaving school at eighteen for higher education is certainly a big step in that progression. Your school is your best source of practical help when considering that next crucial stage.

The contributors to this booklet, all young women who have had some link with NCYW, bring you their personal responses to that progression that will take you beyond school into additional learning and life experiences that will make you a more effective changemaker. From buying a blow up mattress, to learning how to settle in and deal with Freshers' Week read and learn from their first hand experiences of student life.

Your personal moving on will be challenging at times and it may take time to get to that but with a positive mind-set and good support from family and friends, it will be steadfast, sure and effective. Good Luck.
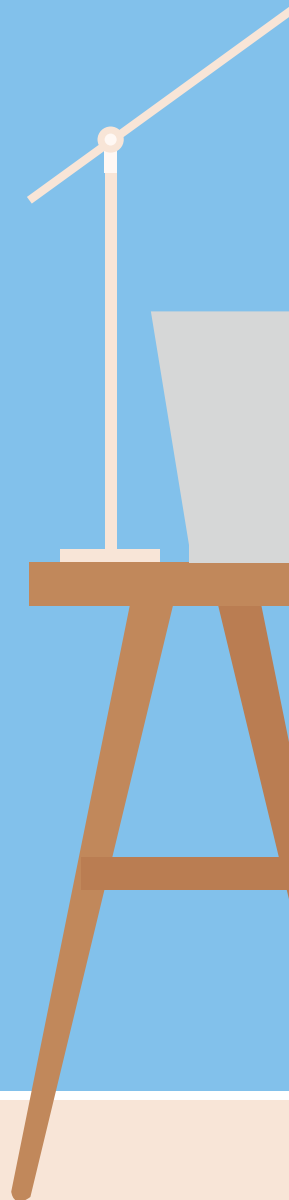
Maisie
English Language and Literature, Oxford University

Pre-University

Throughout school, I always knew I wanted to work outdoors. I was looking into things like horticultural apprenticeships throughout my GCSEs and didn't have much thought about going to university. I couldn't imagine being tied to a desk for any longer! These thoughts, however, changed a little. Whilst I am still keen to work outdoors, in my final year of A-Levels, I started thinking that university might be a fun idea. Although I had always thought it was a bit stuck up, I found the idea of applying to Oxford exciting (challenges are always fun!), but this was only something I started thinking about after all the application deadlines had passed and, anyway, I knew I wanted to take a gap year.

My gap year happened during the pandemic, but I found a job which meant I could work in person the whole time. I worked as a tutor in a local secondary school, teaching GCSE English. This taught me so much – about myself, people, education, English. I was also doing part time work experience with a silversmith as I didn't want to forget my creative interests – I loved this! Taking the year out allowed me to slow down a little with my decisions about university – it allowed me to confirm that it was English I wanted to study at this level (it was the subject I had most consistently enjoyed and been good at, and I also felt it was a subject which allowed me to explore other interests within it). I also spent a lot of time over the year reading really widely, which helped me so much when I arrived – I was a lot more relaxed knowing that I was already on top of things!

Preparations

Moving out is a big deal. It definitely took some adjustment, but I so love it now! The best thing I took with me was my kettle. Having a kettle in my bedroom was bliss – tea can get you through a lot! But I wouldn't stress too much about what to take with you. As long as you have phone, laptop, charger and a clean pair of pants, you will be fine.

First few weeks

I know it's a cliché, but the first term was the biggest emotional roller-coaster for me. I would have the best day ever, and then the next minute I would be sobbing! I spent a lot of time going on long walks to de-stress. However, the good thing about it being a roller-coaster, is that if you're down, you know you will come up! EVERYONE is feeling the same. It is so easy to think everyone is having the best time ever and have all made best friends already, but they haven't. I promise. For me, it is still getting easier and more enjoyable every term.

Try and say yes to as many things as possible at this stage. Try anything out. But don't completely wear yourself out, and also remember that there is plenty of time. Fresher's week and first term is chaotic, so if you'd rather sleep it out (I didn't go clubbing at all in fresher's week) do. Your body will thank you. I was also the only one to not get fresher's flu!

> "As long as you have a phone, laptop charger and a clean pair of pants, you will be fine!"

Ainhoa
Oxford University

The hardest obstacle in my application journey to Oxford University was actually applying as the career advisor at my school suggested that I should not. Her reasoning was that I didn't achieve all 9's at GCSE so should not bother applying. Applying anyway was the best decision I made.

Despite applying for Philosophy and Theology, I was only offered an interview for Theology. In hindsight, now that I am at Oxford and have seen the Philosophy and Theology course, the tutors knew me better than I knew myself as I would not have enjoyed the joint course. I was a bit sad about this but still was excited to interview.

After receiving my offer letter, I definitely did feel the imposter syndrome, especially as I compared myself to my friends who I saw as way smarter and also with offers. Having sat A-levels, I still doubted myself. I thought that I did really badly in some of my papers, putting myself down so I was so shocked when I, as well as four other students in my year, achieved the best results of the school.

My advice from all of this would be to be your biggest believer as no one else can do it for you.

Kirstie
History PhD, University of Cambridge

I remember knowing that I wanted to go to university but had no idea where I wanted to go, how to get there, or what courses were like after A-Levels.

My undergraduate degree was in History and Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. After that, I was fortunate to get a scholarship, funded by the Wellcome Trust, to do an MA in the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick. Now I am doing a PhD in History at the University of Cambridge.

With this in mind, I wanted to share some advice:

Grades aren't everything! My A-Level results were not brilliant due to personal circumstances. After my undergraduate degree, no one ever asked what I achieved when I was eighteen. This was a learning lesson for my degree: always think about feedback and learning rather than agonising on past results. Making mistakes and learning early will make you a better scholar in the long run.

Moving to London from a fairly rural village was a massive transition for me. When considering university, think about the place, the size, the research culture (who tends to go to the university, and what do the researchers care about?) the teaching style (Oxbridge 1:1 supervisions or large seminar settings, for example), how far away are you from support networks?

It takes a while to fit in. The first year is always particularly challenging but don't worry too much! You will find your place. I found keeping busy with extra-curricular societies, volunteering, and student-led initiatives great places to meet others and work out what I enjoy. You can't do everything though, and make sure to check beforehand what your university/the local area has to offer.

Feelings can be overwhelming! Finding 'your people' and having community or support networks is really important for your studies. There are people you can talk to inside and outside of university.

Laura
International Relations with French, University of Birmingham

Choosing my university and course was really daunting at first, as there were so many options! I think I started off looking at probably ten or more, and gradually narrowed it down. I researched which universities offered the type of course I was interested in and looked online at what each course offered (there is lots of useful info on their websites – look at what modules you'll be studying, contact hours, forms of assessment etc).

Then I tried to visit as many universities as I could, because it is so much easier to get a feel for a place in person. Try to look at accommodation and the surrounding area as well as the campus and uni buildings. For some, I could really imagine myself being a student there, while others I immediately took off the list after visiting as there were things that put me off or just didn't feel right. It's so important that you're comfortable with the idea of physically being in the place where you'll spend the next three or four years.

Once you've applied and got your offers, I would recommend trying to attend offer-holder days if you're still struggling to decide on your firm and insurance choices. There may be chance to see inside first year accommodation, talk to academics about the content of your course and find out more about student life there (societies, sports, nightlife etc) – all things which can be really helpful for making the final decision, along with the considerations about grade requirements. I ended up choosing University of Birmingham for a range of reasons: it offered a course I was interested in, I loved the campus and first year accommodation village, it's in a big diverse city with lots going on and it was not too far from home.

It's completely normal to feel really anxious about moving to uni but when it comes to the day, it just happens! Once you've moved all your stuff into your new room, you quickly start to feel at home there. The first few weeks are definitely tiring – making such a big change isn't easy. It takes time to get to grips with it all and some people manage that quicker than others. Just don't panic if things don't fall into place immediately. You shouldn't be ashamed of feeling lonely, sad or worried at the beginning. It might look like everyone else is happy and settled with lots of friends, but I guarantee things probably aren't going as smoothly for them as it might seem. People struggle with lots of different aspects of moving to uni and you're all figuring it out together! Try not to compare yourself because everyone's uni experience is different – there is no right or wrong way to do it. In particular, I'd say don't put pressure on yourself to do Fresher's Week a certain way or love every single moment of it. For me, the reality of Fresher's was actually quite underwhelming after I had built it up so much in my imagination! It's certainly not the make or break of your time at uni. There will be plenty more opportunities to meet people and have fun!

Finally, don't be afraid to reach out for support when you need it and be honest about how you're feeling. It helped me a lot to stay in regular contact with my family, and friends from school. Uni can feel all-consuming when you're there, but when it gets overwhelming, don't forget you have a life outside of it too!

Cliona
French and Spanish, Oxford University

University life is different to school life, and you have more new experiences than you could imagine since making the move.

In Sixth Form, I knew I wanted to try applying to Oxford and other local universities that offered my course. I've always loved learning languages, so I knew what I wanted to study – I was mainly worried about getting the grades and filling up my Personal Statement with relevant experience really! But if the degree you've chosen is right for you, you'll have more willpower than you realise to spend your own time doing things related to your studies because it's what you enjoy doing.

In the weeks before moving, it was time to do the final paperwork, like ordering my academic dress. Fortunately, searching for accommodation wasn't difficult since all first-year students at my college are housed in the same building. On that note, buying an inflatable mattress was probably the best investment of my degree: one great thing about university is getting a lot more freedom and having the ability to have friends visit you makes it worth it. I was lucky to have a couple of school friends at the same university as me who have been an amazing shoulder to lean on in terms of having similar experiences. It just becomes a little harder to coordinate meet-ups with friends from home during the holidays since everyone is in different corners of the country (or the world)!

The idea of moving to university made me a little nervous, but mostly excited. Settling in wasn't bad, it just felt a bit weird to be away from home and to be managing all my time completely independently. The first few weeks were plagued with lockdowns (2020...) and some loneliness: it felt like there was nothing to do but work, but you couldn't really talk to your flatmates when it got hard because you weren't that close yet. However, we soon found out that we all had the same struggles, even despite our completely diverse backgrounds. Talking about it helped a lot, and we spent more time together and soon all found good friends. You'll find that everyone who's starting university is in the same boat and equally nervous about making friends, so don't worry about it and – it's the advice they always give, but it stands true – be yourself! Joining a couple of clubs or societies is a great way to meet people in different year groups and with shared interests to you, so definitely make time for that outside of study.

The most important thing I learned is not to let university work take over your life! University is an experience; grades aren't the only important thing. My year abroad in Andorra, Spain and France has definitely proved this and made it all worth it!

Abby
Politics and International Relations, UCL (University College London)

I studied Government and Politics A-Level and developed a huge passion for reading political theory and philosophy. Due to this new-found enthusiasm, decided I wanted to study politics at university and extend my studies beyond British politics towards inspecting political systems and landscapes through an international lens. Hence, doing a degree in international relations also!

I felt incredibly excited as I wanted to expand my knowledge beyond A-Level. But of course, I was apprehensive as to whether I would be accepted.

I applied to Cambridge to read Human, Social and Political Science but was unsuccessful post interview and being pooled! I was then pretty certain I was going to go to Bristol – as I had not yet received my UCL offer and knew the course had a pretty low acceptance rate – and had started looking into Bristol accommodations and visiting Bristol on weekends with friends.

However, when I received my UCL offer I remember feeling elated and running to tell my mum (I think a bit of jumping up and down was also embarrassingly involved!). It was this reaction which made me realise I should go to the institution I find myself most excited (and even a bit daunted by).

Don't get me wrong, coming from a small Midlands' village, moving to the big smoke, freshly 18, was quite a big step! Yet I don't regret doing so at all and I am so pleased I made the decision which didn't feel comfortable, but felt like a new opportunity.

I received my A-Level results in the summer of 2021 and got accepted into UCL. I then started hitting up IKEA with my parents and joined university group chats (course and accommodation) to start to get to know some faces and names prior to moving in! This was not essential but helped to get a grasp of who is who (especially on my course which is not a huge cohort!).

I really went head-first into the London university social scene – bought the freshers wristband, attended all the club nights, and danced at the students' bars! However, despite the fun nights which we all still reminisce on; I was quickly quite ill with freshers flu and spent the next couple of weeks on antibiotics and embarrassingly coughing in the quiet zone of libraries.

I would say balance is key (easier said than done), but I would, on reflection, have slowed it down and attended some more chill society socials alongside the more upbeat/late evening ones. Going out every night will make you some amazing friends but so will more laid back activities. So do a mixture of both if you can and if that's what you're into of course!

The best thing I did was go on 'friend dates' with flatmates/course mates etc. One of my closest friends at university I went with to Notting Hill for a little wonder around and chat in the first week. Take the time to get to know those who you share a fridge with and ask them questions – university is such a unique opportunity to meet new people.

Also, it is not embarrassing to go home for a weekend in first term! I don't know what it is but there seems to be some invisible rule that when times get hard you have to 'brave it' and not be seen to be running home in the first 10 weeks of term! 10 weeks is a long time, so go home in your first reading week, if you have the capacity to do so (even if it's just for the weekend) and reset to avoid burnout.

Overall, the settling in period is not linear and everyone has such a different experience, but the homesickness will pass and joining societies and engaging as part of the student community will make the city (in my case London) feel smaller. You will start seeing familiar faces on campus and bump into more people than you expect. I wish you all the best of luck!

Anna
History at Oxford University

Back in Sixth Form I remember having very little idea on what to do after finishing school. I remember looking through different course programmes unsure of what subject to choose or if I even wanted to go straight into university.

Attending university open days in Year 12 were really helpful in deciding what to do next as you can't really get a true sense of a place from a prospectus alone. It really helped narrow down universities, as bigger cities like London didn't really interest me back then.

Results day was the next big hurdle and as a member of the 2020 Covid cohort it was rather stressful, especially with the government's U-turn on grades soon after which meant that my place at Oxford ended up being deferred for a year due to an over subscription of places.

Taking a last-minute gap year was not originally in my plan but ended up being a really formative year for me. I took a place on an Art Foundation course at my local college alongside working part-time. With the pandemic I was a lot more limited in what I could do in my gap year, but I was still able to develop hobbies and interests beyond what I was able to do in Sixth Form and helped me confirm my university plans. Applying to university can feel pretty rushed in Sixth Form so taking some more time if you aren't entirely sure of what to do after school can be really useful, although I recommend making some sort of plan for the year.

The transition from art college and a gap year to university was really exciting but I was definitely a bit nervous. University group chats were not something I got very involved in before coming and were not indicative at all of what university would be like. You won't really be able to tell what it will be until you come but it's important to remember that everyone is in the same boat and for me felt entirely different than when I moved school for Sixth Form.

Settling in is the most daunting part but it genuinely wasn't as bad as I thought it would be and having my own independence was really fun, particularly after an extra year at home. I remember all the university guides stressing the importance of joining societies or getting involved in college life and having been through it I can't emphasise it enough. Even just going to Freshers events or avoiding staying in your room helps and will ease the settling-in process.

Before starting I knew that History and humanities subjects in general have lower contact hours than other subjects, but I didn't realise how isolating this can be, especially coming from Sixth Form where learning is very structured, class-based and compulsory.

Organising your own learning is not easy at first and is something that I struggle with at times, even now in my final year. Doing small simple things like planning your timetable and doing library trips with friends can be really helpful.

Going back to studying after taking a gap year was pretty daunting itself and the 'imposter syndrome' was absolutely real but is something you will realise most people will deal with, particularly in first year when you're still figuring it all out.

The university experience is made up of highs and lows but at the end of the day, everyone goes through it and from it I have met some of my closest friends and made great memories. University has been one of the best decisions I have made, and I have gained immensely from it – from studying something I actually enjoy, to meeting so many people and living in an entirely different environment than I have ever been in before.

Of course, university is not the only pathway but if it is something you are interested in, I highly recommend just having a look at different universities and choosing wherever you feel you would be happiest as ultimately it could be where you spend the next three to four years.

Jasmina
Gap year

Thinking of taking a gap year? The decision to take a gap year can often be a difficult one, particularly when faced with the pressure to head right into university.

Personally, I took a gap year to improve my employment prospects by seeking out work experience before undertaking my Law degree. There is a wide range of opportunities out there, such as mini-pupillages or internships. Seeking these out independently shows initiative and gives you invaluable practical experience that not only aids personal development but can also boost your CV for the future!

A deciding factor in my decision to take a gap year was also the financial burden of university. Working put me in a stronger position to budget and fund my education.

For anyone interested in pursuing law I would recommend the Legal Cheek website, to gain access to law events and opportunities such as Insight Days at corporate firms.

Whether you work or travel, you will inevitably mature as an individual, and taking a gap year will put you in a great position to start university.

What will you do?

We really hope that you enjoyed reading this booklet and hearing about the personal experiences of young women from NCW. These former NCYW members have now moved on to become part of our Network 18-30, the next stage of NCW. For more news of the Network and how you can continue your journey as a changemaker with NCW, please see our website **www.ncwgb.org/ncyw-under-18**

Follow us on our socials!

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📘 📷 **NationalCouncilOfWomenGB**

What is NCW/NCYW?

About us

NCWGB is an internationally recognised organisation. It is one of several National Councils of Women affiliated to the International Council of Women (ICW). It also has special consultative status at the UN, meaning it can send delegates to international conferences such as the United Nations' Annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York.
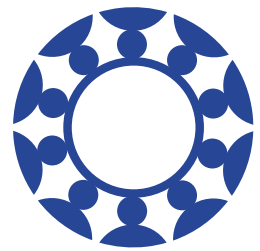
National Council of Women (NCW)

At the National Council of Women, we want to ensure that women play a full role in our society. Our aim is to make women more interested in local, regional and national affairs and to get them more involved in decision-making.

We represent women's views and concerns at the highest levels of government and are determined to make sure that discrimination is eradicated from all areas of society.

We carry out research, hold consultations, debates, and seminars, follow developments in legislation and respond to government consultations on a whole range of issues.

National Council of Young Women (NCYW)

Part of NCW dedicated to reaching out to the younger generation via a network of schools and colleges linked to NCW. These NCYW schools and colleges receive regular news updates and information, and invitations to take part in national surveys or multi-school seminars on current issues.

"For more than 120 years, NCW has campaigned tirelessly on a range of women's issues, including the right to vote, the creation of a women's police force, the end to violence against women and girls worldwide, and an improved quality of life for all."

Barbara Maddison,
Honorary Vice President

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