

For The Independent
August 2006

Thoughts for New Undergraduates and Tense Parents

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It was the word 'paradigm' that threw me. During my first sociology seminar group, a fearsomely clever hippy-lookalike with an Irish lilt and sticky-up hair kept inserting it into amazing sentences, while I, silent and uncomfortable in my seat, had no idea what the word meant. Then there was the shock of the first vast economics lecture where we were all just insignificant notebooks in a giant, tiered field of rustling notebooks.

If you are about to be a student, or are the parent of one, here, in case it is of any use, is a view from the dark side of the table.

Balance is your best bet. Read and work most of the day, on the majority of days, and you will do fine. Spend time learning to argue. Play some sport or go walking. Learn how to cook interesting food. Do something creative.

Do not work more than these hours, unless you have a very special reason, because it will be bad for your mental health, and would very likely be driven by a need to please or compete with an obsessive mother or father (sorry, parents). Do not think about the money your parents are spending on you; tough; that was their decision.

Moderation and variety are sensible. Employers, when you actually come to leave university, prefer rounded young men and women who did well but not too well. In thirty years of teaching, I have known a few students who needed to drink more, including one youngster who eventually lightened up and learned to consume alcohol, and coped fine with having a grandfather who had won the Nobel Prize in her subject, but hardly any. Remember your kidney has to survive for years. If you must consume a fair amount of alcohol in your first

week, be cautious, drink plenty of water, and make sure you look after yourself.

Wake up to a world of diversity. You may not have to learn to share a flat with an extreme Goth, as one of my family did, but you will live alongside young men and women who look fabulously different from you. Some of those people with strange accents, turbans, high heels, insane leftwing views, no heels, daft rightwing views, no turbans, and the rest, will become friends so good they end up sleeping on your living room floor, with toddlers attached, when you are all 35 years old. My main teaching these days is supervising undergraduate dissertations in groups of six. It is like the United Nations in my office, which is great.

Fees may be on your mind. This is the first year where you or your parents will stump up 3000 pounds. At the risk of hurting your feelings, it may be useful to remember that from your lecturers' point of view absolutely nothing has changed. Their salaries have not altered; the extra money will not have affected the quality of carpets in their offices. You may feel you are paying for Rolls Royce treatment but, rightly or wrongly, your teachers will not see it that way. Most are sore that we teach twice as many students per person as when they were young and earn little compared to graduates of 25 years old.

If you bear in mind that it costs about twice the 3000 pound fee to educate each UK student per year, and that in America you would pay 15,000 pounds a year, then you will have an insight into what goes through your lecturers' minds about teaching undergraduates being a loss-making business.

Don't be moralistic. I have known a few students to look down on gay contemporaries, or to be obsessed by others' drinking, but it is none of your business, and barely of mine.

Don't call me Andy.

Don't show up 10 minutes late unless there is an ambulance and severed limbs somewhere in the story. Do not miss classes. Do not

expect lecturers to tell you how hard to work or what to do. School is over and most people are too busy to chase after you.

Feel free to wear terrific clothes in the first week, but you will discover that most university folk do not.

Expect some lonely and tired moments, especially three weeks from the end of first term. If you miss your parents, or a brother, or an old girlfriend, then that is natural and OK; you have relationships worth caring about, which is a golden lining.

Expect to think often that you are not clever enough. You are.

If you have a problem, try asking a new student friend for advice. Confiding in people could help them even more than it helps you. Remember to keep an eye open for friends who might be struggling with anything.

Send a postcard home. It will raise your slice of the inheritance.