



# How to get your kids through University

by Mark Davies, Anthony Cook & Brian Rushton

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**Mark Davies** is Professor of Bioscience at the University of Sunderland

**Tony Cook** is Senior Lecturer and Director of the STAR project ([www.ulster.ac.uk/star](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star)) at the University of Ulster

**Brian S. Rushton** is Reader in Biology at the University of Ulster

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction – what this book is about

*You the parent, Chris the student, and us the teachers*

You are the parent of a teenager. This book is about you and how you can help your teenager who wants to study – or may already be studying – at university.

It doesn't matter whether you went to university or not: this book is still for you. If you did experience Higher Education – university-level education – that was probably long ago, but even if it wasn't, changes in Higher Education mean that your teenager's experience will be radically different from yours. Also, when you were younger, barely 15% of your age group went to university and now it seems like everybody's offspring is going.

UK Government statistics suggest that 43% of 18 year olds went into Higher Education in 2005 and this is set to rise to 50% by 2010. Consequently, this might be your family's first experience of going to university and you might be feeling a little in the dark as to what your teenager might experience.

In short, you are a typical parent of tomorrow's student. You know the importance of the coming decisions in a way that young people do not. You are faced with the problems of offering the best advice and support you can, but have a limited background. We and this book are here to help with that.

Chris, your aspiring teenager, is perhaps your eldest offspring and certainly wants to enter Higher Education in about two years' time – or may already be there. It does not matter whether Chris is male or female, but she is more likely to be female since 7% more women than men gained entrance to university in 2004/5. This is a trend that will probably continue.

Throughout this book we will use “Chris” as an example. She will be female throughout, but do not worry if you have a son. What is true of Chris, your daughter, will also be true of Chris, your son. Chris is apparently faced with a sequence of important life changing decisions. She will take them in her stride – kids that age do – without ever realising that each set of decisions opens one set of doors and closes another. She needs to decide what to do now, what choices to make before she enters university if she’s not already there, and she needs to build realistic expectations of Higher Education. She will not be doing this alone since, whether you know it or not, you and others will guide her. But, of course, she is young and obviously knows what is best for her...

You will also find, throughout the book, specific examples, which we have called Case Studies, of real life situations which show how students we have known have dealt with the various problems and situations described in the book.

We are three teachers in Higher Education. We are probably, on average, a bit older than you are and some of our kids have been through the university system and emerged on the other side. And perhaps like Chris, our parents did not go to university either; our families had no history of Higher Education.

Chris may be joining our ‘academic family’ in two years’ time or so. It is in our interests to ensure that Chris adopts us willingly and is not placed with us arbitrarily, that she will work with us, and that we are as proud of her when she graduates as you are now.

We have written this book to help you make sure that Chris makes sensible decisions about her future. We also want to make sure that neither you nor Chris get any unwelcome surprises in the next few years. But this is not a “follow our formula and you will succeed” book. Chris is in charge of her own success, or otherwise, and what is right for one student may be

completely wrong for another. Chris is an individual and you will know better than we do what might work for her and what might not.

We know from our own experiences that each student is unique. This is why there is no magic formula and we don't expect you, or Chris, to follow all our advice. Hence, for example, we supply advice on what to do if Chris finds herself on the "wrong" course, even though we spend time discussing how to choose a course so that the "wrong" ones can be avoided.

So this book is about you, the parents of students who are approaching or are in Higher Education in all its forms. That means mainly universities, but also includes those Higher Education courses outside universities, for example in Further Education Colleges. We've used "university" to mean any institution where Higher Education courses are taught, and "course" to mean a programme of study leading to an award such as a degree (for example B.A. or B.Sc.). The language of Higher Education can be confusing, even to us, so we have provided Chapter 13 *The jargon* at the end of this book, which we think you will find useful.

### *Getting into university – making reasoned choices*

Why would Chris want to go to university at all? The publicity says that the likelihood of her getting a good job will be much greater with a degree than without, and it seems reasonable that this is true when so many of those already in the job market have degrees. And in any case what is the alternative? Leave school at 16 and try to get a job? But what job? With few paper qualifications there are few career opportunities. Staying on to do UK A levels, Scottish Highers or a vocational work-related qualification seems like a good idea, but what can you do with A

levels and similar qualifications that you can't do with GCSEs?

Chris needs help and that means that you need help. You have seen the circus on TV surrounding the A level results in the summer, with anxious students jostling for places. You have heard all about the good side of Higher Education: the job prospects; the increased lifetime earning potential; and the social life – but there is a down side as well. How can you avoid the problems? Problems like getting a place – how can you avoid the late summer scramble to get Chris on to an appropriate course?

Chris is probably now looking at what qualifications she will need to enter Higher Education on the course she wants to study. This is not too soon to discuss her long-term aspirations. The UK GCSE results and teachers' advice might lead you to believe that continuing in her best subjects (for example History, Biology and Geography) would maximise her results and therefore her chances of getting a place at a 'good' university. This might be true, but is no good if she wants to specialise at university in a subject for which these are not a suitable preparation.

It may seem to be too early to be deciding on a career, but now is the time to start taking the long view. What is her best route to the career she wants to pursue, UK A levels or Scottish Highers, vocational A levels, or other forms of entrance qualifications? What are her preferred career paths and perhaps, just as important, what are not? She does not want to start unnecessarily closing doors, but the path she chooses now will determine what opportunities are immediately available.

Universities and courses vary in their attitude to entry qualifications. Some expect to have students with a prescribed combination of qualifications at high grades for particular degrees; others are more flexible. Courses vary in the intake grades and qualifications

required for entry. What does this mean? Are those with higher intake grades better or just more popular? Or maybe they are trying to filter out students who might take more effort to teach with the implication that the teaching may not be as good. Anyone can make a silk purse out of a piece of silk. Should Chris apply to those institutions that are offering to take her with her highest predicted grades on the assumption that these must be the “best” places in which to learn?

Choices made about the course and the institution will have a profound influence on Chris’s future and to some extent those choices are being made from age 13 in the UK when choices about subjects to study for GCSEs or their Scottish equivalents are made. You, of course, will never know what the alternative futures would have been had you made different choices. When choosing courses and institutions, therefore, encourage Chris to make informed and positive choices and not to look back.

No matter what choices are made now or in the future, remember that no avenue is ever really closed; the journey might just be a little longer. This is the era of life long learning during which few can expect to have a single lifetime career and most will undergo retraining between, or even within, jobs. We had a colleague at university who initially studied history and then he decided he wanted to do medicine. It took time and, obviously, money, but he got there in the end.

One of our own sons went to university to study Chemistry and four years later ended up with a degree in Computer Science. He was never forced through failure to change direction but made a series of sensible decisions for him. All his parents ever did was to listen to his arguments and help him to refine them until he knew that those arguments made sense, and his parents validated his decisions with unequivocal approval.

In Chapters 2 and 3 (*Student timeline*) we will take you through the steps that you will take between now and when Chris gets her first job. When will you and Chris be taking life-changing decisions? Which decisions matter and which do not? Who is going to help you; who are the experts? Who has a vested interest in the decisions Chris might make and who is most likely to have her best interests at heart? Whose advice can you trust? And perhaps most importantly, how to choose a course and a university.

### *Getting the study right*

Success at university is as much about commitment as it is about intellect. Commitment does not only equate to hard work. It is also about joining in, attending not only the timetabled sessions but forming and contributing to what we call learning communities (small groups of students who work together); joining in the life on the campus and developing networks of mutually supportive friends and colleagues. Being a student is much more than going to lectures and doing the work.

When Chris is at university she will be doing things that you never had the opportunity to do. She will start asking questions and seeking advice about things you may know nothing about. What are you going to say when she asks for advice about joining the Dead Parrot Society? How can you offer sympathetic counsel when you may not understand? What are you going to say when she asks you nothing at all and keeps her university life screened off from you? Chapter 4 (*What it's like at university*) will help you to appreciate Chris's university experience and help you to give good advice.

You may have gained the impression that at university Chris will be sitting around in lecture theatres listening to old men droning on about things

that no one else understands. This may not appear to be what Chris should be doing in two or three years' time! And what about the exams? The GCSEs were bad enough. So much riding on so little. And the coursework.

At least at school there was a lot of help from the teachers but what can Chris expect at university and how can you support her? How can you and Chris develop reasonable expectations of life at university so that you can make reasonable decisions and not be disappointed? We want to set your mind at rest and to do that you need information about the work she will be doing at university. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will tell you about *Learning*, *Assessment* and *Teaching* at university. The more prepared you are, the better equipped you will be to offer sound advice.

Chapter 5 is about *Learning*. Some students come to university with an expectation that they will be taught everything they need to know. This assumes that teaching staff know everything and that everything is known. But most university staff will have a strong background in research, and research is really about questioning things. That means that we do NOT know. New students often come from systems with a defined syllabus in which everything that candidates need to know and should be able to do is written down and tested. The idea that Chris will at some stage be expected to find out something that her teachers do not know can be a strange one. Furthermore, university staff make compromises. They make decisions about how much time to spend doing different aspects of their jobs. Some will be doing mainly research and will be rarely accessible to students while others will give their teaching a higher priority. Learning at university then is about organisation, collaboration and independence.

Chapter 6 is about *Assessment*. Universities are assessing institutions. We are authorised to assess

the abilities of our students and universities award degrees, diplomas and certificates on the basis of our judgements. It is an awesome responsibility. Students can teach themselves, they can and do learn by themselves but they cannot assess themselves and award themselves degrees. We know that different students learn in different ways and so our assessment systems are very varied. Chris will like some forms of assessment and not others. She will probably think that some of it is unfair. You and she need to know how we run our assessment systems so that you know what is happening and what is important and what is not.

Chapter 7 will tell you about our *Teaching*; or rather, how we encourage students to learn. The transition from being a supported learner to being an independent one occurs gradually between year one at university and graduation, and then through into employment. We design our teaching that way. At school, Chris will have a close network of friends and teachers who have known her for many years. When she eventually leaves she will be at the top of the school both socially and academically. Her teachers will probably have been setting her work that has to be completed to a strict timetable with short deadlines.

Her teachers will go through every word and may even help her re-write some of it for formal assessment. When she enters university she will start as a stranger, maybe in classes of 200 or more. Depending on the subject she studies there may be relatively few hours timetabled in the classroom and she may feel that the rest of the time is her own. How are you going to advise her when she spends Friday to Monday at home because all her classes are on Tuesday and Thursday? She will be set work with long deadlines and will be expected to manage her own time. University staff will make this change to independent learning as gentle as they can, but she

will have to develop new learning strategies to cope effectively. She may seek your advice and approval. What are you going to tell her?

### *Getting help*

Most students will be like Chris when she goes to university and will therefore be between the ages of 17 and 21. What were you like at 18? Were you well-grounded, sensible, logical and mature? Well, the chances are, Chris is not going to be either. Mistakes will be inevitable, but a university is a safe environment in which to make them. Just because you will not be there all the time, however, does not mean there will be no support. There will be professional help with academic development and with health and social issues. Your role as a parent will still be important.

As academic staff we will impose high expectations on Chris and eventually demand work of the highest quality. But we know that Chris is not the finished article on arrival and our teaching and support are designed to suit the academic and social development that students go through during the three years of the typical degree course. Chris has little need for the burden of parental expectation as well. So she will need your unequivocal support through what might be difficult but also exciting times. There will be high spots and low spots, excitement and disappointment, approval and disapproval, mistakes and triumphs; but the comfort of a stable, supportive and undemanding family background will help Chris through.

Universities are relatively self-contained and Chris can expect to find all the support she needs on campus, so in Chapter 8 (*Student support services*) we will tell you about the helpful services Chris can expect to find in a typical university. This will reassure you that facilities will be available, but Chris will have

to go and get the help herself. University staff rarely go out searching for problems to solve so we are reliant on Chris's good sense to seek the help she needs.

### *Getting money*

We do not know how much money Chris will owe when that first job comes along, especially since we do not yet know when her university career will start, much less finish. The debt, however, will probably be considerable but at least it will not be yours – unless you choose it to be. Students are no longer considered to be solely dependent on their parents for financial support. They are old enough to have credit cards and personal accounts and they are old enough to take the responsibility of a debt. Her debt will not grow as fast as yours would have done over the same period because interest rates for students are pegged to the rate of inflation.

The debt is balanced by the prospect of a higher income when she enters a graduate profession and does not have to be repaid until a threshold income is reached. Chris can also work while at university. Indeed more than money can be gained by the experience of work at this time. In addition, she may choose to complete not only a first degree but may need some further qualification in order to practise in a chosen profession – or she might just enjoy studying at university level.

At least one of us continued into study at a postgraduate level simply because we loved the subject with little consideration of where the money might come from. With hindsight, better planning and earlier decision-making might have been appropriate and would certainly have lessened the financial burden.

So there are choices to make – how long to spend at university, how much is it reasonable to borrow, how