
Staying Home vs. Moving Away

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 12**

Karina

Welcome to Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni podcast. My name is Karina, and I am a Collaborative Outreach Assistant at the University of Essex and I work closely with our Aspire and Aspire Higher programmes.

Katie

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Karina

Many students feel that the only option when going to university is to move out of their family home even when attending a local university. There are benefits to move in into university accommodation, such as living with friends or being close to your lectures, but it isn't for everyone. Today we'll be discussing the differences between moving away and living at home, whilst studying to help our listeners better understand their options. It's important to note that this topic also relates to non-university students too, as at some point in your life, even if you don't live at university, you may aspire to move out and live independently, with a partner or friends. This might be to pursue an apprenticeship full time job or attend an arts school even. In this episode, we are joined by Jordan and Ashley who were both students at the University of Essex but experienced different living arrangements. We're going to ask them what it's like to commute or to live on campus. So firstly Jordan, please could you introduce yourself?

Jordan

Hi my name is Jordan. I'm currently a PhD student at the University of Essex. That means that I'm studying to become a doctor. I'm not a medical doctor but a Doctor of Literature, but I originally studied my undergraduate degree in Literature and I commuted as a student for my entirety of my student journey from undergrad to masters, which is the next stage, and now into my PhD as well.

Karina

That's great thank you so much for that and Ashley would you like to introduce yourself?

Ashleigh

Hello I'm Ashley, I studied creative writing when I was at university and I lived on campus in my first year. In my second and third year I chose to live off campus but locally, a sort of 10 minute walk away with some of my friends. And I currently work for the outreach team organising events and activities for students to help them figure out what they want to do in future.

Katie

Thank you both and welcome as well, I think it's right to say that commuting is a less common option for students to think about when they go to university and so many of our listeners might not actually know what it really is, or what it involves and Jordan, seeing as you've had a lot of experience in it would you mind just sharing maybe a typical day for a commuting student please?

Jordan

Yeah. I remember when I was applying for university, I had this idea in my head that I had to move far far away. That's what you're supposed to do as a student, you need to move to the ends of the earth and I remember all my friends were going to really exotic places like Manchester and Chester and Exeter and things like that, and it was really, I kind of felt like I had to go along that route and move far away and I applied to Essex and I wasn't that keen on Essex, to begin with. It was down the road, it was only 30 minutes away from where I live, and I thought to myself, I don't want to be that close to home, my mum's going to turn up on campus and that's going to be really, really embarrassing and I don't want that to happen, and I remember going on

an open day to the university and I fell in love with the place. I liked the atmosphere, the community, the people and I remember being on the train home and I clicked yes on my UCAS form to say that Essex is where I want to go. And it didn't matter my mum didn't turn up on campus and actually it was quite nice that little journey into uni. So a lot of my lectures, which are the sort of big classes that you have and the smaller seminar groups, a lot of my timetable was quite early, so I had quite a lot of early morning starts, so I normally would have left the house by about eight o'clock in the morning, I would get on the train, journey down to Colchester from the station, down to the uni by bus so it's all really well connected. And I'd try to spend as much time at uni as possible. So I didn't think that because I was living away from university that I wouldn't get to spend time at the uni, I made sure I spent as much time there as possible. Really integrated with people, with the lectures, we went to the cafes afterwards. The chats and conversations and that was really just a part of making university feel like home, so there didn't feel like there was this distance between the university and home. I could kind of make it feel like home, even though wasn't living there.

Katie

Thank you, that was really interesting to find out and just important to note that Jordan commuted via train and there are other modes of transport, whatever is suitable for you and whichever university you decide to go to as well. So, in comparison to this, I just want to ask Ashley if you could just summarise your experience as well, that would be fantastic, please.

Ashleigh

Sure, so. I guess the only real differences to Jordan's experience are the travel time, obviously living on campus you only have to leave, well, for some people, a few minutes before your lectures start and also the option to sort of pop home throughout the day. So as Jordan mentioned, I'd just finish my lectures and go off to the cafe, library, sports and do sports clubs and stuff. And, but, for me, I would be walking to and from my accommodation, sometimes four times a day, five times especially if I was meeting friends in the evening or heading out into town and then back to my room and it really depended on what my plans were for the day but I had the option to sort of pop in and out, which was quite nice.

Katie

So coming back to Jordan, then who do you think a commuting lifestyle would be suitable for? So, for our listeners that are not sure, or maybe think it might be best for them. What do you think they should be perhaps thinking about?

Jordan

I was really surprised when I was commuting because I kind of got it into my head that I'd be the only, that everyone be living in accommodation and it would just be me, the only person who has to travel home on the train or the bus or what have you and I was surprised by the amount of people at University of Essex, in particular, who were commuters, from within Colchester itself the surrounding areas, from Ipswich from Clacton and Chelmsford and even as far afield as Southend on sea and London, people really did travel from all over and I kind of think that if you're willing to travel that distance for something that you're really, really passionate and you really, really enjoy it's so worth doing. And I think it fits people who might already have a job that they want to keep at home. Whether that's in a particular field or particular area and people don't always want to give that up well you can't always transfer locally, it's still doable that you, you, you can stay at home, it might be that you already have a house, potentially, in some cases, people already have lives and families and things that they want to sort of stick close to. Might have caring commitments or sort of people they want to be close to there so it's not a problem to stay at home and and commute in but I was just staggered by the amount of people who were doing the same as me. And I think we did actually form a community of just commuters who made ourselves separate from everybody else, but it was quite nice to know that when I was leaving university and waiting at the bus stop or going on the train, there'll be other people who

were doing the same thing as well, so we were all kind of in the same boat, and that was really, really lovely.

Katie

That's so nice that there was a little community there and yeah that's really lovely. So how long was your train journey, by the way?

Jordan

On average, it was normally about 15 to 20 minutes or so, so it wasn't it wasn't too bad just a few stops on the train and then just a short bus journey of about another 10-15 minutes from the station.

Katie

Okay, so, in total, probably about 30 to 40 minutes was one of your journeys and do you think anything longer than that may have been a bit too much for a commuting student?

Jordan

Not necessary, I think there were people who travelled a lot further than that, where it could have been up to about an hour or more, and I always used to find that the train journeys or the bus journeys were a really good time to do some extra reading, so I use the time to actually read some of the texts, obviously I was doing literature so lots of reading to do. It was a real good opportunity to actually work on the journey there, so it wasn't a wasted journey it wasn't just me sat there passively just watching the world go by. I could sit there and read a book for my next class or start making notes laptop on my lap, typing out part of an essay and things, so you could use it quite productively so it didn't really matter how long it was. It was a nice it was a nice time I used to get to myself and its quite peaceful, music in and coffee in hand to do a little bit of work.

Katie

Oh perfect and that was actually something I was going to ask you, was did you make the most of that that time you had, so that's great. Yeah definitely utilise that that free time to catch up on your readings and things. Perfect. Thank you, Jordan.

Karina

And I just have a question for Ashley then, so obviously you decided to move to university. How far was that from your original home?

Ashleigh

The University of Essex is actually only one hour's drive from my family home, and so I did consider sort of traveling by car each day. It's a little bit too far on the train for me and I did consider driving each day and, but when I was looking for which university to go to, it was actually really important to me that I did move away that was one of my main things that I wanted to move out. But sort of the universities that I went to visit a bit further away than one hour, that was out of my comfort zone, I felt like I needed to have that happy medium of being close enough to pop home if I need to. Close enough to bring my laundry home if I need to. And far enough away that as Jordan said earlier, my mum wouldn't appear on campus to come and see me all the time, so and yeah the University of Essex was the perfect distance really to have that happy medium.

Karina

That's great. Thank you so much for that and just to follow on how did it make you feel making that change and leaving home?

Ashleigh

I felt utterly terrified if I'm honest. Yeah on my first day I remember thinking, oh no I've made a terrible mistake I didn't want my mum to leave me there, I was very homesick within a couple of

hours of her leaving. I just thought what have I done? This is terrible and I'm not exaggerating a few hours after that I was saying this is the best decision I've ever made because I sort of I bumped into my well now best friend, we were living in the same flat she was brand new too. She was as terrified as I was, and we really hit it off, discussing how scary it was on moving day. And it I just suddenly felt like oh wow everyone feels the same way as me. Everyone's a little bit nervous, a little bit excited. So yeah it was a real roller coaster of emotions on that first day but meeting her within a couple of hours, I was well away and I remember my mum saying "I can't keep up" because I texted her and said, "please can you turn around and come and get me" and then, a few minutes later I said "oh don't worry I've met somebody now and we're going out this evening we're going to go and grab some dinner in a minute". So yeah my mum couldn't keep up with me, but it was a big move. At such a young age as well, if you decided to go and move away when you sort of 18 years old, it does feel like a big big change and a big jump. But you are sort of well away there's so many support options as soon as you get there and it's all such an adventure. It's not scary in the slightest once you've got that first bit over and done with.

Karina

I can definitely agree with that actually with my own experience as well just moving in day sort of being super exciting and then, when your family leaves you're like hold on a minute, I am alone here now um but yeah definitely super exciting, I had the opportunity to move in with 15 other people so obviously immediately made new friends and it sort of felt very quick to adjust. Another question for you Ashley, so for our listeners what advice would you give to students sort of thinking about moving away from home?

Ashleigh

That's a good one. So I think my first piece of advice is that no matter how far away you move from home, home is always there to go back to. So I have friends who travelled sort of from Essex to Scotland for university and in her second year, she wanted to come home for lots of events and meeting up with friends and stuff. So she used to just fly back and she'd get really cheap flights and she'd to fly back to meet us all for a weekend. And I remember thinking wow she's chosen to go to Scotland that's so far away and but, in reality, she could come home whenever she wanted to and she had all of us going up to Scotland to visit her as well. So I think by my second year, I really thought how you could go anywhere in in the country, you could look to go to a university abroad but home will always be there, you can just pop back and. And also, I think another piece of advice would be that it's an adventure, it is just you have to sort of throw yourself into it and it's every minute of it is just fun and when you're surrounded by new people and new societies and clubs and there's always something going on, just sort of take in the adventure and go with the flow.

Katie

Ashley that was some really lovely advice, thank you for that. I think that some students assume that if you don't move away from home you won't improve your independence skills, because, as you were saying Ashley you move out and then that's it, all of a sudden, you're making friends and going out for dinner or cooking your own dinner. In some sense, you might not necessarily get that experience from commuting so I was just wondering what you thought about that Jordan, do you think that you still gain independence, even though you're potentially moving, not moving but traveling back home every day?

Jordan

I think you can, there's a lot of people often getting their minds, this idea that you have to go and get the full university experience and the full university experience involves moving to the university and I think that isn't the only way to experience university. University really is what you make of it and it's the opportunities that you say yes to and get involved with and there's lots of clubs and societies on campus and you can be part of those, whether it's being part of a sports team or being part of the politics society or the theatre arts society or any of those. You can be involved, whether you are living on campus or off campus and you can really enjoy what's

available that way and I think in some ways commuting is part of life, anyway, particularly in when you go into the world of work, you might well be commuting into the next town, into next city, into London, into places so it is a skill in itself if perhaps you don't travel that much or you are somebody who thrives on going on public transport or driving or anything like that, so you don't miss anything. Perhaps if you wanted to you know be a bit more independent at home, you could ask to take on a bit more of the reins that perhaps you didn't get to do before. If you didn't cook lots at home, you could start asking maybe that's something you might be interested in doing or if you've never done you're washing before which but maybe some students haven't done in the past, I know, I remember a lot of my friends talking about confusion in the laundrette on the campus and not really being sure how the washing machines worked. So if you were looking to try and get some of those life skills in that area, you can certainly ask your parents at home and I'm sure they were happy to teach you.

Katie

I think a lot of parents and guardians listening are going to love you Jordan, because you've just signed up a load of students to do the washing and the cooking at home which is great, we will we always recommend that students have a little practice before they go to university, but even better yeah definitely if you're, if you're going to be commuting and you want to gain those skills. That's yeah it's going to be precious for your future. And I think also just going to university you're in you're in charge of your education, you're just getting on that train, getting on that bus, if you've not had to do that for college or sixth form, that's a skill that you're learning and something that will be so good, like you said for the future for your future career and so yeah, thank you so much.

Karina

So when considering whether to move away or stay at home it's something you'll want to review is cost. These will vary depending on location, travel and transport, so whether you decide to go to university you'll want to consider the cost to travel between the university and your current home, especially if you're someone who knows they'll be traveling home frequently. So, Ashley how often did you travel home and what mode of transport did you use?

Ashleigh

Yeah it actually varied throughout my three years, I think. In my first year, I was really committed to staying at university as much as possible, because I was really aware that it was easy to just travel home, but I have really bad FOMO, fear of missing out, and I remember sort of popping home in the holidays in my first year and lots of my friends had decided to stay at university, even in the holidays and I really felt like I was missing out. So in my first year I pretty much stayed in my campus accommodation for the whole year, and just sort of popped home for the holidays. In my second year I went home, a lot more, I used to pop home about once a month and see my family and then in third year I sort of went back to first year mode and I was so desperate to live every moment and like appreciate it all, because I knew it was it was going so quickly, and I, I could see the end nearing. I think in my third year I didn't really travel home very much and also in my third year, I had a part time job so that meant that I needed to be in Colchester near to the University of Essex, a lot of the time. But when I did travel home, I took the train and I made sure I had my rail card to get nice cheap travel and there were lots of sort of student discounts available at the time, so I would always look up and those before traveling, but yeah it really varied, depending on the jobs I had and the year I was in.

Karina

Thank you for that Ashley. And as you were traveling every day, your cost may have been different Jordan compared to Ashley's and what are the cost you commuter students need to consider?

Jordan

I think the main thing you'll want to consider is perhaps how often your timetable requires you to be in so you will get a timetable that will say when your classes are and it might well be that you're in five days a week, it might well be in that you're only in two days a week. So that really gives you an indication potentially as to how regular you will be traveling. Obviously you'll be wanting to come in for the lectures and the seminars and any additional clubs and societies you're part of. That then it's about how often perhaps you do you want to come in to just work in the library on campus or work in some of the other cafes or the other areas of resources that are available to you.

So you could well buy a season ticket for the week or the month of the year if that's something that you might be interested in either on the bus or the train, and that means you get unlimited usage, but that only really works if you know that you're going to be in quite a bit because that's how you, you know you're saving money by knowing that you're going to be in at least four or five times a week. Otherwise I just paid normally on the days that I came. On the trains you can get a thing called plus bus, which means that you get your train ticket and then you can use that ticket to on any of the buses within Colchester so that means, then, you know if I want to go to campus and then stop off in Colchester town itself and go to the cinema or do shopping or look around, I could use that and not pay any extra to use the buses that way. So that was the easiest way and there's lots as Ashleigh was saying, there are discounts and things there are cheaper bus fares, in some cases cheaper season tickets, you can get you got the 16-25 rail card as well. Sp it's always worth looking, there are some good deals out there, if you are a student to save money when you are traveling.

Katie

Yeah so unlike commuter students, students who live on campus they obviously have to consider having to pay for their bills, for their accommodation and they're doing their food shopping and depending on your circumstances as a commuter student, you may or may not necessarily be contributing to those costs as well, but I was just wondering Jordan if you'd mind, giving a little rundown of because we're talking about costs at the moment in terms of the maintenance loan then, how is this different for students who decide to stay at home?

Jordan

If my memory serves me correctly, I think, by living at home, you received a bit less compared to if you were living away from home, in the sense that perhaps it's kind of believed that your expenses might not be as high. Some people do live at home and they're living at home rent free with their parents, some people might want to contribute towards that cost, but you have got a kind of safety net, if you are living with parents, sometimes that your costs could potentially be slightly lower and you might save a bit of money by not living on campus in some cases, depending on the circumstances or how you want to travel so really I did contribute to home costs that's what I used my maintenance loan for so I paid a kind of rent to my parents to kind of make sure that I felt like I was contributing some way, and then mainly it was then using that maintenance loan towards travel and books and other expenses that way, so I was lucky I didn't have too much expenditure but I made sure it was going to the right areas first, before I looked to make sure I could treat myself or buy the other extra additional things that were maybe not as essential.

Katie

Yeah perfect, thank you for that Jordan and the other part about maintenance loans to consider if you're deciding between moving away or living at home is that Jordan is right, you do receive a smaller maintenance loan if you decide to live at home, but it also changes if you decide to live sorry, if you decide to go to a university that's in or outside of London so regardless of what living arrangement you decide, that maintenance loan will be different for everyone and then from there, you can make decisions about how you're going to budget that money effectively and by using Jordan's tips there will be really beneficial if you are thinking about committing Thank you

very much for that. How did you fit your commuting lifestyle around additional things that you did at university Jordan?

Jordan

I'm trying to remember what clubs societies I was a part of now, but I can't for the life of me remember off the top of my head, but I know very early on, I was a Student Ambassador at the University. So that's a paid role within the University that you help out with events things like open days and applicant days and loads of other events that the university runs and you get a real sense of what the university is involved with, you work with different teams across the university and it's a great work experience to sort of get an idea of what the events are going on how the university interacts with different people.

So luckily that was all on campus work, so it often meant when I was studying in the daytime and then had some events in the evening or certain days I've come in specially just to do a whole day, open day or an applicant day as well. So it was quite easy to kind of fit things around my kind of university lifestyle and actually university became my second home, I think I spent so much time there, I used to come in when I didn't have to, I used to socialise with friends and work in the cafes and discuss our work and what we were doing or work in the library, so I was there, probably more often than most people, so it was quite easy for me to fit campus work around my own studies that way.

Karina

That's great and can I just ask as well to that, did you have time to take part in any sort of additional clubs or sports teams?

Jordan

I think the only club that comes to mind that I was part of I think I was part of the theatre arts society in first year, so they do sort of combination of drama and performances they put on shows in the on campus theatre that we have as well and they did weekly workshops and sort of sessions and so that's why I definitely remember doing that, but I can't for the life of me remember anything else but there are loads of clubs and societies and normally during the first week of being at university there's a big kind of welcome fair, where all the clubs and societies get together, they tell you more about what they do, you wander around, find out more about the, sign up to the ones that you're interested in, they often have sort of taster sessions, that you can get involved with. You can try something new, something you've never done before, something that you know that you're really, really passionate about. And it's a great way of just enhancing that university experience, meeting people who are not on your course but share similar interests and tastes to you as well as that was quite fun to do.

Karina

That's great, thank you for that Jordan and how was your sort of work slash social balance at university Ashley did you find it easier having your lectures and activities closer to your accommodation?

Ashleigh

Yeah I think it's different for everybody, but my personal experience was that university was like a big student bubble where life was just go go go, I was always out, whether it was studying, in the library, café, in the cinema, at the art gallery and going out with friends like it was just it was always go go go, so I think I personally had to always check in with myself and my energy levels and make sure "do I actually want to do this, this evening, or this afternoon or do I feel like pressure to say yes?", because you're always in that bubble and you really have to sort of stop and listen to yourself and check in and make sure you're not too knackered but surrounded by friends who are saying come on let's do this come on let's do that and yeah it is it's amazing I absolutely loved that and, but I think living on campus you're definitely you have to make an active effort to sort of pop out of that student bubble for a little while and do something non-uni related. And it does take a little bit more effort to do that when you're on campus but, as I said, I

absolutely loved it that was my sort of personal experience and I was quite good at having a balance between work and social life, if I felt like I'd been focusing too much on what sports clubs and societies and not doing enough work I'd tell myself right get back in the library, focus on that for a while and, whereas I do know lots of other people who sort of having the independence that you that you do have at university it took a little while for them to get that balance right and so yeah that is a work in progress when you first start, you have to sort of test the water and see how things go and, yeah as Jordan, mentioned the sort of fair where you sign up for everything it's easy to go crazy and sign up for everything when you're when you're a super excited at the beginning of the year and, but then, as you sort of move along you realise what you have time for on what you don't have time for and sort of you find that balance yourself.

Katie

Absolutely you're so right I think it's some, for every single student, it will be a different experience and everyone will be at different levels and will learn in their own way. When you were at university Ashleigh, did you ever have any experience with the residence life team? So they are students who live on campus and they're there to support students who are living on campus as well.

Ashleigh

Yes, on my first day actually in my first year just after I'd met my future best friend we were greeted by our residence life coordinator, who brought us some nice lovely cupcakes from a local bakery and he said he took us to Tesco, to show us the way and that was a really nice opportunity to get to know him and he explained what his role was basically, they're there if you ever have any problems in your accommodation with other students or the facilities and you have a direct contact through to them and for their support, so that was a really nice touch on day one, to meet them and be shown the way to Tesco so that was great and so yeah that's as much as I know about residence life and I didn't actually need to use the services for the rest of the year, which is a good sign and but yeah I don't know whether you want to sort of expand on what they do.

Katie

No that's great, thank you Ashley and yeah no lovely really lovely story and I love that you mentioned the cakes because I've actually said in a previous episode that cakes are always a great introduction when you're first meeting people. But yeah just don't forget about the dietary requirements and yeah, thank you for that I also just wanted to mention that there is additional support for those that commute as well, so it doesn't matter what your living arrangements are there is support for every kind of student and I know at some universities, they even have a commuter society, so you can meet other students if you haven't already that will be traveling as well, and I think that's quite a nice feature to have. Thank you both so much for joining us today, we hope that your lovely answers have provided an insight for our listeners into both living situation so our listeners hopefully can make a decision, if they are thinking about going to university about which option would be best for them, and if you're still uncertain then that's absolutely fine. Sometimes people forget that you don't have to stick with your first option like Ashley mentioned earlier, she was wanting to stay at university all the time and then in her second year, she was traveling home quite a lot and you're living arrangements can change if your university is close enough for you to do that so that's absolutely fine and thank you both again, thank you.

Karina

If you want more information about the reality of student life at university check out our other episodes or you can direct message current students at [Essex.ac.uk/life/chat](https://www.essex.ac.uk/life/chat) to find out more about the accommodation choices. We also have a blog entry written by a commuter student that will be sending to all of our registered listeners. You can sign up to be a registered listener via our student resources web page, if you have any questions about this episode don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #understandinguni or send an email to

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