

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

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Student Survival Guide

(for students, by students)

ULB



www.birmingham.ac.uk/welcome

Introduction

This Student Survival Guide has been put together for you by a group of first year students.

The aim of the guide is to give you a range of hints and tips on how to survive your first year at University. Who better to tell you than the students who've been through it all already!

We hope you find it helpful.





Prepare for university in advance!

It's never too early to start buying and packing – try to make sure you leave yourself plenty of time to pick up anything you've forgotten. **Being prepared will put you at ease** and make you confident that you are ready to go.

- On the Welcome website (www.birmingham.ac.uk/welcome) you'll find a checklist of things to bring; we couldn't live without an alarm clock for the 9.00am starts and a lamp for the late nights!
- You may wish to buy some of the designated books before arrival; however, don't feel pressured to buy all the books just yet. The reading lists for your course can normally be found online or will be sent to you by your department, but don't worry if you don't receive a reading list as some departments don't send them out. And remember that **secondhand books are just as good.**
- Whether it's stationery or bedding, don't panic if you have forgotten something important – Birmingham is the UK's second biggest city, so there are plenty of shops to be found, and there is even a Ryman's on campus for discounted stationery.
- In terms of doctors – sign up and stock up! You can register at most surgeries in the area via the NHS website before arrival, but try to stock up on any medication before you leave. You never know when illness might strike, so be prepared with your usual remedies too.
- Practise basic skills like **cooking, washing, changing the bedding and cleaning.** You'll be surprised how many people can't do these things. You aren't alone if you've never boiled an egg! Learning the basics from friends and family, books or even the internet, will go a long way to help you when you arrive.





- ▣ Get thinking about budgeting and how much student finance you have coming in. Then you can decide how much you can afford to spend weekly or monthly.
 - ▣ You can save money by investing in discount cards like a 16–25 railcard for travel, or an 'NUS card', but remember that your Birmingham student ID can be used to obtain student discounts across a lot of High Street stores.
 - ▣ Searching for the Birmingham Fresher's **groups on Facebook**, such as ones for your halls of residence or your course, will allow you to meet people in a similar position to you, or maybe even your flatmates; you can share your worries and excitements with others in the same boat.
 - ▣ Don't worry if your flatmates aren't online though – you'll meet plenty of others to chat to.
 - ▣ It also helped us to find out information about our course, opportunities in Welcome Week and Freshers' events. Visit the Welcome website to see what's available: www.birmingham.ac.uk/welcome
- ▣ If you are living at home, you'll still need to prepare for starting University, but you will probably feel less has physically changed compared to others who have moved away. Why not get in contact with FOCSOC (Freshers off Campus Society) and visit the Staying Local Hub on the Saturday of Arrivals Weekend to meet others in the same situation.

The terms 'Welcome Week' and 'Freshers' are both used interchangeably to describe the week before teaching starts, during which a variety of events will be held to welcome you to the University.

Getting involved in Welcome Week!

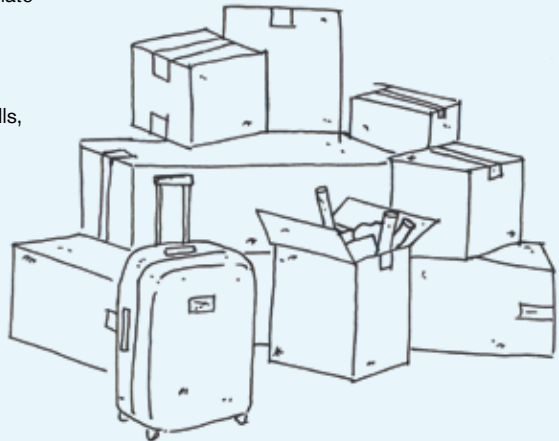
We remember travelling to University for the first time like it was yesterday. Whether you're moving here or just travelling locally, that first journey is a **nerve-wracking experience**, but **the welcome is amazing**.

Moving into halls

- ❑ If you're moving into halls you will be greeted by members of the **Residents' Associations** and **Student Mentors** who will help you with **all of your bags and boxes**, making you feel at home right away.
- ❑ Don't worry about unpacking everything immediately; get door knocking! This is the best way to introduce yourself and get to know the people living around you.
- ❑ Make sure you have questions ready to break the ice, and bring things to share with others. You'll be surprised at how many friends you make when you come bearing chocolate and a pack of cards!
- ❑ If you don't seem to get on with your flatmates, fear not! There will be lots of people to befriend around your halls, on your course or at societies.

Staying local

- ❑ If you live off campus it's especially important to get involved, introducing yourself to people on your course, joining societies and staying on campus outside of your study hours. There are still lots of events for you, so you won't miss out.
- ❑ The University arranges a **Staying Local Hub** during **Arrivals Weekend**, so that you can meet up with other students in the same situation before Welcome Week.
- ❑ **FOCSOC** (Freshers Off Campus Society) puts on lots of events specifically for you.





General

- ❑ Freshers' packs are available to buy on the Guild website for the events throughout the first two weeks. The events range from club nights to live music, there is even a Freshers' Ball to top things off.
- ❑ Without scaring you, you should be aware there is a lot of pressure during Welcome to drink, drink and drink. **Freshers' is meant to be the best two weeks of your life**, so do what you enjoy; find the balance between having fun and being safe and well. Don't feel embarrassed if you don't want to go out all the time. There are plenty of events catered for a calmer atmosphere, and trust us; the non-clubbing events are even more appealing after a few heavy nights out.
- ❑ Use Facebook and other social networks to find groups of people to walk down to your introductory lectures with.

- ❑ As well as academic events, there will be societies fairs and sports fairs to attend in the first two weeks. Don't miss out – sign up for anything that appeals to you! You don't have to commit at this stage, you can decide later what you want to stick with. There will be lots of other new students like you, so don't feel intimidated!
- ❑ Don't forget that Freshers' Week isn't a representation of the whole year, if you don't want it to be. As much as the partying is great fun for some, if it's not to your taste then **get involved wherever suits you**, and remember that everything will settle down a few weeks in.

Welcome Week is a chance to make new friends, but don't panic if you haven't found your best mates quite yet. We personally took a couple of months to settle into friendship groups, and throughout your entire degree you will constantly meet new and interesting people.

Getting to know your new home

Getting to know different aspects of your new home is important – you need to feel settled, as you're going to be here for at least three years – and who knows, you might like it so much you want to stay even longer!

Campus

One of the most important things when you arrive at the University is getting to know where everything is. You get a map in your Student Diary – so use it!

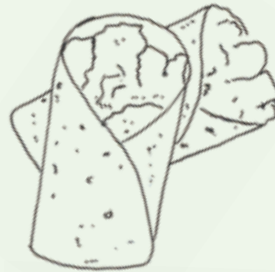
- Welcome Week is the best time to explore before your lectures start. Work out where your first class is beforehand so you don't have to endure the embarrassment of walking in late.

Beyond the obvious – lecture halls and seminar rooms – there are loads of other cool things to check out on campus:

- **Farmers Market** – we love this – the ostrich burgers and falafel wraps are epic, the beer is homebrewed and the cakes are amazing
- The Barber Institute of Fine Arts – an award-winning FREE art gallery complete with a café
- The Guild – home of Joe's Bar and the legendary University Dessert Challenge
- Make the most of all the campus facilities, including the food court, SPAR, Ryman's, banks, card shop, the Barber Institute and the Munrow Sports Centre

The surrounding area

It's a good idea to venture out beyond the campus and find out what the surrounding area has to offer. Make sure you check out Selly Oak, because most students decide to live there in their second year.





The city

It can be quite easy to get caught up in the 'student bubble' at campus based universities, like the University of Birmingham.

You could happily spend your three years in the comfort zone of the campus, but why miss out on the awesome stuff the city has to offer?

- ❑ There are all the obvious things – shops, clubs and cinemas.
- ❑ Birmingham also has loads of unique things to see: Cadbury World, Sea Life Centre and the Botanical Gardens.
- ❑ Plus tons of quirky little markets selling jewellery, fabrics, food and fish.
- ❑ There are also heaps of places to eat – make sure you experience the Balti Triangle, and Ming Moon in China Town. Plus, check out great offers on the chain restaurants that are scattered all over the city centre (like Pizza Express's Orange Wednesday deals).

Being in Britain's second biggest city means getting from A to B is easy and cheap. Travel by bus or train (we're the only uni in Britain to have its own train station!) to the city centre and the surrounding areas quickly and inexpensively – so there's no excuse not to get out there and experience everything you can.

Feeling daunted? Take the opportunity to go on any tours around campus. And why not arrange a day trip into the city with your flatmates or coursemates?

Independent living

For most of you this will be the first time you have lived away from home. There is no doubt that you're going to face some of the problems and issues that come with this new experience.

- ❑ Don't be scared, but you're going to have to learn how to cook, clean and do your own washing. **Be confident and just get started.** Your white socks may come out pink but that's all part of the learning curve.
- ❑ Taking your washing home is fine at first but eventually you're going to have to get on and do it yourself. The washing machine facilities are great and there are easy steps to top up your card online. The machines are pretty self-explanatory but if you're stuck you're not alone. There'll probably be someone else hovering around wondering where to put their washing powder.
- ❑ University is a time to get your hands dirty. The toilet will not clean itself and there is no mysterious man called Henry who will Hoover your carpet. Make sure you stock up on cleaning products and sort out something with your flatmates that suits everyone. You're not going to make friends by leaving your dirty pots and pans around the kitchen. Clean up after yourself!
- ❑ Although you're living independently, you're not expected to do everything for yourself in Halls. If your power goes off, you don't have to go in search of the fuse box yourself to try and fix the problem; just ask reception and they'll send someone round to deal with it.
- ❑ **It's a good idea to stock up on all the food you need for a week on one visit to the shops – it saves time and money.** It's also a good idea to make a list of what you need, so you won't forget essentials.
- ❑ Cooking is not as hard as it looks. You may not be a master chef by the end of the year but hopefully you will have improved. There are lots of student cookbooks available and loads of recipes online. Visit the Welcome website to view a range of recipes.





- ❑ Some of you will be on the meal plan, which means you have money on your card to spend on food around campus. There are loads of different options; you can even use it at Starbucks on campus! Just be careful not to use it all up mid-week and also be aware that money doesn't carry over onto the next week. Even if you are on a meal plan you will still need to cook your own meals if your money runs out.
- ❑ Meeting new people can be scary, especially if you have to live with them for the next year, so make a good first impression by being friendly and not locking yourself in your room. Having problems with your flatmates is not uncommon at university – don't be afraid to stand up for yourself, but remember to be considerate of others and compromise.
- ❑ **Earplugs can be a life saver!**



- If you don't seem to get on with your flatmates, fear not, as there will be lots of different types of people to befriend around your halls, on your course or at societies.
- If you need help and support visit: www.as.bham.ac.uk/support

Money Matters

Everyone will develop their own way of managing their money, but here are a few tips we've picked up to get you started.

- ❑ Work out a weekly budget and stick to it – it's brutal, but your loan has to last you the whole term (so don't blow it all at the start of the year!).
- ❑ Take advantage of all your entitlements – not just grants and bursaries, but all the perks of being a student. Your student card is your passport to great deals (check out www.studentbeans.com).
- ❑ The thing you'll probably spend most of your money on is food and drink. There are ways to reduce the cost of your shops:
 - Shop around both in stores and online – you'll be surprised how much the price of branded items vary from shop to shop. (Consider buying store brands to save money too.)
 - Avoid shopping when hungry or thirsty – you'll end up with a ton of stuff you really don't need.
 - Take advantage of supermarket loyalty cards to get rewarded for your purchases.





- There are a few options for food shopping if you're living near campus:
 - Tesco, near Five Ways
 - Waitrose, Home Bargains and small grocers and butchers (a great alternative to the main brands) in Harborne
 - Sainsbury's, Tesco and Aldi in Selly Oak
 - Do your shopping online and split the cost of delivery
- Where you go will depend on where you live, but remember that the convenient option will not usually be the cheapest option.
- **Packed lunches are a great money-saving idea** – food can be expensive on campus, so unless you're on the meal plan, prepare food in the morning.
- Did you know you can still get free prescriptions even after you turn 19? Fill in an HC1 form to save money.
- Only take out the cash you're prepared to spend on a night out and why not share taxis home – it's safer too.

We've talked about saving money, but uni also offers you opportunities to make money.

- The JobZone in the Guild (and online) is a great place to start if you're looking to find part-time work. It's important not to do too much so you can keep up with your studies, so find a balance that works for you.

- If you are having financial trouble, talk to Student Services or the ARC in the Guild, as they may be able to help:
www.ascham.ac.uk/funding
www.guildofstudents.com
- Follow the Student Funding Office on Twitter @UBSavvySquirrel.

Getting into a routine

You'll discover that a routine during Welcome Week is out of the question – you'll be too busy having fun, meeting friends and enjoying your new-found freedom to worry about when it's lunch time!

However; it's important to develop a routine for yourself when things have settled down, as no-one else is going to do it for you and there'll be much less structure than you're used to.

Develop a work routine

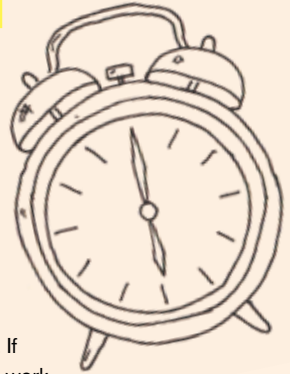
Staying on top of the workload is important, because ultimately this is why you are here.

- Print out your timetable and use your Student Diary to write down other things that you need to remember to do.
- Go to as many of your classes as possible – having incomplete notes from missed lectures is not ideal when it comes to revising.
- Note your plans for each week (essay deadlines and extracurricular activities) in your Student Diary, so you know what your priorities are.
- Try to use the time in between your classes for personal study or assignment preparation.
- **Decide in advance when you will be studying and stick to it.**
- Don't let problems mount up – sorting out concerns as you encounter them will make them more manageable.

Get plenty of sleep

It is important that you catch up on sleep after Freshers' but don't let this pattern spill into your lectures.

- **Make sure you get enough sleep, so you're up and ready for those 9.00am starts!**
- Try to wake up at a set time each day – you will get into a pattern and get the most out of your day.
- Use an alarm clock. If you think they don't work for you, be inventive – set multiple alarms, use high volumes, put it out of reach of your bed or even use a vibrating alarm under your pillow.





Have regular, healthy meals

We hate to admit it, but our parents are right – regular meals are important. They help maintain energy levels, encourage concentration during lectures, and fill our rumbling tummies!

- Don't skip meals – you may think it's saving you time, but it'll actually make you less effective.
- When you have time to cook, make an extra portion or two and freeze them, so you've always got something easy and healthy available.

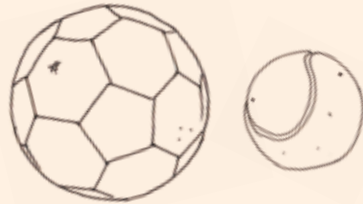
Make time for household chores

Consideration is the key to communal living. And it'll probably help you concentrate if you're living in a clean, tidy environment.

- Agree with your flatmates who will do what and when – you don't want to have arguments about whose turn it is to clean the kitchen or take out the bins! Decide early on (before bad habits start) and stick to it.
- Plan a time to do laundry and do it at the same time every week – it'll make it easier to make sure you have enough clothes for the week.

Make time for socialising and exercise

- All work and no play... you know the rest!
- **Make sure you leave some time in your routine to have some fun** – it will help you concentrate better when you're studying and it's important to get a broad range of experiences from your university life.



Get your parents or guardians to take you for a big food shop before you move to uni, so that you have enough food to last you throughout Freshers' Week.

Health and wellbeing

A documented side-effect for some new students is the loss or gain of 14 pounds in weight known as ‘the Freshers’ 14’.

The lifestyle overhaul of starting university can be quite challenging, but being aware of the choices you’re making and the impact they may have on your health is important.

Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to avoid the dreaded Freshers’ 14!

Alcohol

While alcohol can seem to dominate students’ lives, it doesn’t have to be that way and certainly not all of the time.

- ❑ There are plenty of events that don’t centre around alcohol, which also usually makes it easier to build friendships.
- ❑ Don’t feel pressured to drink every night during Freshers’ – it’s not a weakness to miss an event if you don’t fancy it. Many students find Freshers’ exhausting.
- ❑ Be sensible – remember 14–21 units per week is the recommended limit. Alternating alcohol with soft drinks is definitely the way forward.
- ❑ Stay safe and stay with your friends – there’s safety in numbers.

Eating

Food is fuel!

- ❑ Preparing meals and having plenty of healthy snacks handy will help you avoid eating crisps and chocolate.
- ❑ There are many useful food outlets on campus – we have a handy fruit and veg stall that has lots of choice at student prices and we recommend the jacket potato from Café Go!
- ❑ If you’re not in catered accommodation it’s a good idea to prepare a packed lunch at the start of the day.
- ❑ Make sure you get nutrition from a variety of foods (not just pasta!).

Exercise

With your new environment and lifestyle it’s easy to forget about exercise, but it can help you de-stress, as well as stay physically fit. There are plenty of options:





- ❑ The Munrow Sports Centre provides deals for students.
- ❑ There are lots of clubs to make exercising more fun and they're not all hardcore sports – the Dance Society offers plenty of new and exciting forms of exercise... try Zumba or maybe even Salsa!
- ❑ Go for a walk – it's free and who knows what you might discover round the corner!

Homesickness

It's equally important to be aware of mental wellbeing. Homesickness is inevitable and it can affect anyone at some point... trust us!

- ❑ Talk to people – you'll be amazed how many others are feeling the same!
- ❑ Be aware of the services offered by the University – whether it's stress, homesickness, or loneliness, there are people you can talk to: Student Services, the Student Mentor Scheme and your Welfare Tutors are all on hand to offer support: www.as.bham.ac.uk/support
- ❑ Anxiety and stress are normal, don't worry about worrying!

Health

And finally, you may find you come down with a bad cold at the start of term, this is usually called 'Freshers' Flu' but is nothing to worry about. Be prepared! There's no perfect solution, but if you get it, having a supply of cold remedies, throat lozenges, tissues and a hot water bottle will help you get through.



It's important to eat both before and after drinking alcohol. It'll help you feel much better the morning after!

Becoming an independent learner

The main difference between college and university, besides your new-found propensity for eating Pot Noodles for breakfast, is **the importance of learning and working independently.**

Long gone are the college days of 20-hour weeks, mock exams and set homework; most university students will find they have a lot less contact time than they are used to.

It's tempting, in this scenario, to spend your free time indulging your love of BBC iPlayer, but **fall into this trap and you will find your marks falling.**

The time you spend in lectures is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to your degree; so it's important to embrace the joys of independent learning as early as you can. **Think of your degree as a gym membership; you only get out what you put in!**

- No-one is going to force you to do your work, so you have to just crack the whip yourself. Try and get into the routine of doing a certain amount of preparation for lectures, seminars or lab work.
- Keep a list of what you need to do for different modules – it'll help you keep track of your work and it's great to see where you're making progress!

- **Check your @bham email account regularly so you don't miss important information.**
- Let's be honest – if you skip a lecture your tutors won't know – until they read your poor attempt at an essay. You're paying to be here, so you might as well turn up to your lectures!
- Make sure you see your Personal Tutor early and often, as he/she is your first point of call for help and advice and they will know where you can go for further help if needed.
- Address academic problems as soon as they arise so they don't escalate.
- University lecturers don't tend to sugar-coat things; feedback is normally direct and to the point. If you don't understand the feedback you've been given, feel free to talk to your tutor about how you can improve.
- Equally, make sure you take the opportunity to provide your lecturers with feedback by completing module questionnaires.





- ❑ If you have an idea on how to improve the teaching or the course, or if you would like the chance for a good moan, the Student Reps are all ears so get to know them, or better still, become one yourself.
- ❑ Although you're learning independently, that doesn't mean you're alone. There's loads of support on campus, including the Academic Skills Centre, which can help with maths, essay writing and other useful skills. See www.as.bham.ac.uk/support for more details.
- ❑ Many courses run Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), which help students learn together: www.pass.bham.ac.uk.
- ❑ Halfway through your first year you'll have a transition review meeting with your Personal Tutor about your progress. Write down any worries or questions you have and get their advice.
- ❑ When you are reading, get into the habit of looking up unfamiliar words. It will increase your vocabulary, improve your understanding of texts and improve the quality of your written work.



- Library inductions run through the whole year, so it's never too late.

- For study skills and strategies visit: www.gel.bham.ac.uk

Assessed work and exams

It is very easy to leave your assignments and revision for exams until the last minute, and we've all been there but **it is important to be more organised at university**, as there's a lot more work involved in completing assignments.

- ❑ Referencing an essay is a scary thought, but your tutors will teach you how to go about it and the library provides really helpful referencing guides.
- ❑ Try and study at a tidy, distraction-free desk.
- ❑ Avoid creating unnecessary stress by getting to know the library before your assignments are due. The Main Library is huge but the librarians are very helpful, so don't be scared to ask for help if you don't know how to find a book. JustAsk! is a live chat box on the library website, which is easy to use and you get a quick response.
- ❑ Be proactive and gain better grades by emailing your essay or assignment plans to your lecturer, but do it in advance of the Christmas or Easter breaks and give your tutors plenty of time to provide you with feedback.
- ❑ Aim to complete work well in advance so you have time to clarify anything you don't understand.
- ❑ For every 50 minutes of work that you do, take a 10 minute break. It helps you use your time more productively (and you may be able to use this time to do something useful – eg, your washing, tidy up your desk, get some food).
- ❑ **If you're easily distracted give your phone/iPod/Internet cable to your flatmate and tell them you can't have it back until you've done 1000 words or an hour of work.**
- ❑ If you work part-time, make sure you plan your shifts well in advance so they don't clash with deadlines.
- ❑ Find a way of handling stress in a positive way: listening to calm music, drawing or playing football are good examples, or go along to a workshop to find out how to cope with exam stress.





- ❑ Create a colour-coded exam timetable so you've got enough time to revise for each exam. Share it with your flatmates, so they will then know when quiet is needed, so you can concentrate.
- ❑ Get to know people in the flats around you so that when you need quiet in the future you won't just be the annoying person who's asked for quiet.
- ❑ There are plenty of quiet study places on campus – find them and park yourself there so that you can concentrate on your work and exam preparation.
- ❑ Use a timer that you can stop and start to time past papers, so you don't have to find three hours to do it all at once.
- ❑ Try to read your departmental handbook and the handouts from your introductory lectures. They cover a range of issues, so **sit down with a cup of tea and give them a good read through** – you'll at least know what's there if you need to refer back to it.



- Don't forget that you can talk to your Personal Tutor about any problems you are having with your assignments.

- Your Personal Tutor can provide you with lots of academic advice and support. They have regular office hours each week so you can make an appointment to suit you.

- For details of support services visit: www.asbham.ac.uk/support

Where will I live after first year?

A few months in and you've started to settle into being a student.

You can boil an egg, you've decorated your room with posters and located the cheap bars. You've even finally shaken your Freshers' flu, but beware because now a new disease is gripping your peers: 'housing fever'.

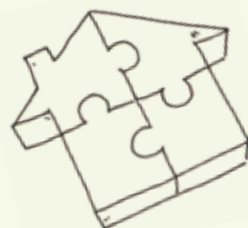
Housing fever

Suddenly everyone is frantically rounding up their friends and descending on Selly Oak's estate agents with a hunted look in their eyes. No-one wants to be the only one without a place to live, but **hasty decision-making could land you with over-priced rent, a house with a questionable smell or housemates that play havoc with your last nerve on a daily basis.** Resist the symptoms of housing fever and relax: there are way more student houses than students; so you won't end up homeless (and nor will anyone else, for that matter). **Your friendship group in February is likely to be very different from October, so wait until after the Christmas holidays to think about housing.**

Follow our survival guide and you'll be fine:

- ❑ Choose flatmates wisely – best friends aren't necessarily best housemates (and moving in with the guy/girl you fancy is just asking for trouble!)
- ❑ Look at plenty of houses before committing to one – there's no rush, so **be picky.** The estate agent may tell you 'this is the last house available', but **Selly Oak is crammed full of student houses!**

- ❑ Decide on important aspects and insist on them: double glazing, fire alarms, good locks, especially if the crime rate is high in your area.
- ❑ Go through the SHAC service (in the Guild), as they have lists of accredited landlords and can provide support.
- ❑ Consider location: for nurses and medics, proximity to the hospital might be important, but Arts students may prefer to be closer to the Barber.
- ❑ All-inclusive bills can be a blessing or a curse. Carefully tot up your estimated weekly spend, **including TV licence,** and figure out if it's worth it.
- ❑ Keep your parents involved in the process – they've probably been through it all before.
- ❑ Get your contract checked by SHAC before signing it!
- ❑ **Know your rights when it comes to estate agents** – they shouldn't be charging you to look at houses.



- Looking for flatmates? Try attending mixing events or advertising (or responding to adverts) for flatmates on the SHAC website.
- You don't necessarily have to move into a house. There are several other options:
 - Third party halls such as Victoria Halls
 - Limited spaces in University halls for second year students
 - University-owned halls in Selly Oak (Jarratt Hall), so you can still be in halls, but close to Selly Oak
- There is plenty of support available and choosing housing is lots of fun.



So in summary: what we're really trying to say is - relax, don't panic and be aware that there's lots of support if you need it.

Welcome to the University of Birmingham.

Enjoy it!

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

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www.birmingham.ac.uk