Studying geography at university: Is it for me?

Jenny Hill, University of the West of England

It was a cold autumn day and I had just moved all of my gear into a very small room at the top of an old house in Bevington Road, Oxford. My parents had said goodbye and I suddenly felt very alone and very nervous. What had I done? This was the first day of the rest of my life – had I made the right decision in coming to university to study geography?

Let’s be honest, if you are considering continuing with your geographical studies at university it can seem not only exciting, but also a little daunting. You may well have to leave the familiar surroundings of your school/college, the friends that you have made over a number of years, your parents, brothers, sisters, and even your much loved pets. It is perfectly normal to feel a little worried, as well as excited, about striking out on your own and becoming a self-styled geographer!

To demonstrate that your concerns and expectations are perfectly normal, the GA’s Post-16 & HE Phase Committee interviewed geography students at the University of Chester, the University of Gloucestershire and the University of the West of England, Bristol to discover what they had been looking forward to and what they had worried about in terms of leaving school and beginning their studies at university. The students also explained how they felt a year or two into their university adventure, especially how studying geography at university is different from studying geography at school/college.

What were you most looking forward to?
The students were asked first of all what they had most looked forward to with respect to their university studies before they arrived on campus. It was clear that there was both a social side and an academic side to their expectations. Many of the students mentioned the prospect of moving to a new city, seeing new places, making new friends, and acknowledgement of increased independence:

*Looking forward to meeting a lot more new people from different areas of the country... and getting involved with the social side of university.*

Gloucestershire student

*You’ve got to organise things yourself, make sure you’ve got everything you need for the next day.*

UWE student

It is true that almost every decision will be yours to make, so you need to ensure that you are motivated from the outset and able to manage your time efficiently to make the most of your independence. This sense of freedom was also anticipated with respect to teaching and learning:

*I really liked the idea of being more in charge of my own learning... being able to choose parts of geography that I actually wanted to study.*

UWE student

http://geography.org.uk/
I was looking forward to pursuing geography further... there’s so much out there that you can do with geography.

Gloustershire student

What were you most worried about?
In terms of what the students were most worried about, very similar issues emerged once again. They were concerned about leaving home and making new friends, fitting in, and even „how stupid I was compared to everyone else“ (Gloustershire student). But, all the students went on to say that in reality they made friends easily because everyone was in the same position and there were lots of opportunities to meet people through Freshers’ week, joining a wide range of university societies (such as the Geography Society), and even through the academic ice-breaker tutorials and field trips. Additionally, there are student ambassadors to show students round campuses during the first weeks of term, and course and halls representatives are on-hand to help new students settle in. At many universities there is the opportunity to join a Facebook group so you can chat to your house or course mates before you arrive on campus. All the students concluded that it didn’t take them long to settle in, with one saying it took her „about an hour“ (UWE student) and others, perhaps more realistically, saying it took them 1-2 weeks. There was a consensus that it was easy to make friends whether you lived on campus, off campus, or stayed at home with parents.

The students also expressed concerns before arriving at university as to whether they would cope with higher level study:

The step up from A-level to degree level ... I was worried how big the step would actually be.

Gloustershire student

Again, the students went on to say that they made the transition without too much difficulty in the end:

I was worried about the workload and if it would be too hard for me to do ... but I found the first year a bit more relaxed than doing A levels. I didn’t have any worries in the end.

Gloustershire student

The lecturers have more time for you one-on-one to help you ... you just email them and go and see them and they’ll help you.

UWE student

The students commented that the amount and complexity of work builds up slowly over the years of undergraduate study and you are taught skills to enable you to cope with the increased demands. These responses match other opinions which suggest that students actually experience a greater challenge moving from GCSE to A level study rather than from A level to university study.

http://geography.org.uk/
How is university study different from A level study?
When the students were asked how they thought university study would be different, or has actually proved to be different, from A-level study, different styles of teaching and learning were commented upon. In particular, the greater freedom they would have to guide their own study was mentioned:

'There’s more freedom in the way you learn as opposed to being enforced.'

Chester student

The main point of uni is independent learning... going off researching different topics... you can delve into whatever you want to do really.’

UWE student

You can put your own perspective on what you want to learn about.’

Gloucestershire student

This freedom was seen positively in terms of the learning experience. Geography at university is your geography not your tutors’ geography:

Personally, I am really enjoying geography at university... the depth you go into in different modules is brilliant.

Chester student

At least you’re actually doing solely what you want to do.

Chester student

You can pick what you want to do and gear it more towards your interests.

UWE student

Additionally, students recognised both the great diversity of topics that were available to them at university and the depth of study they now engaged in. They noted that they enjoyed „the opportunity to study so many different topics“ (Gloucestershire student) and this included allied subjects such as biology, sociology and criminology. The students also commented upon:

The depth in which we have to go into on our own ... back everything up and find evidence.

Gloucestershire student

[http://geography.org.uk/]
What is most enjoyable about studying geography at university?
Two of the most enjoyable aspects of studying geography at university were taking part in fieldwork, both locally and abroad, and participating in laboratory work.

‘Lot more practical work with the fieldwork and using labs, which is quite good fun’

Chester student

There is much more opportunity to learn in environments beyond the classroom. The students talked at length about their field experiences in a range of exotic locations ranging from Switzerland to North America and further afield.

UWE students in the Sahara Desert during a field trip to Tunisia

You can even be assessed in diverse ways in these different environments. Students at Gloucestershire talked about being assessed using podcasts, posters, presentations, and in association with local communities and industry. They noted that there was a great variety of assessment types beyond written exams and essays and this is the case now at many universities. This system allows you to play to your strengths, just as you would do in a work situation.

Another feature of university that students appreciated was the opportunity to undertake placements between their second and third years of study. These are either paid or unpaid periods of work with employers that usually feed into a personal development portfolio. Comments included:

You’ve got relevant skills to go on your CV ... it sets you apart from the rest’

UWE students

Nice to be able to get into the workplace before you actually go and look for a job’

UWE students

http://geography.org.uk/
Geography was viewed as future-oriented and relevant by the students:

*It’s a very diverse subject and so many different careers*’

Chester student

*You become really well rounded ... get all the skills you need to do lots of different jobs*’

UWE student

Students talked about studying new and relevant aspects of geography such as environmental reconstruction, renewable energy, carbon footprints, natural hazard management, globalisation and international development. Add to this an understanding of land degradation, water resource conflicts, territoriality and identity, and poverty and global resource use, combined with a capacity to use current technologies such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and you are equipped to deal with many of the most important challenges facing contemporary societies. This has been stated by the two major institutions supporting academic geography in the USA and the UK:

*Many of the major questions facing society at the local, national and international scales have very important geographic dimensions.*

Association of American Geographers

The students also understood the importance of the discipline in helping them gain a good career. Studying geography at university develops a diverse range of knowledge, understanding and skills that can be applied in a variety of work places. It develops the skills/qualities cited most often by employers in terms of graduate capabilities: working effectively in a team, communicating clearly and working with accuracy. The students commented that studying geography at university made them dynamic and adaptive graduates, employable in a number of different professions.

To conclude, remember that university is not just about enjoying your geographical studies. It is about making life-long friends (and memories) and deciding the kind of person you want to be in life. To conclude my story, it wasn’t long before I met up with my housemates, joined a host of university societies and didn’t want to leave Oxford! I enjoyed studying geography so much I went on to undertake a doctorate at Swansea University and I have remained at university ever since so I can continue to teach and research. With respect to the more recent experiences of the geography students outlined here, you can visit the GA Post-16 & HE Phase Committee website at http://www.geography.org.uk/11-19/universitygeography/ to access three podcast interviews. They might well demonstrate that the excitement and concerns you experience as you consider progressing with your geographical studies from school to university are shared by many of those around you. Why not do as they did and give it a go?

For further reading about how to connect school and university geographies see:


http://geography.org.uk/