The first week of university

Mark’s account

The first week of university, otherwise known as ‘Welcome Week’, was a particularly ‘interesting’ experience. One of the very first things that I was offered after collecting my room keys was a ticket for a Fresher’s party. I do not particularly enjoy drinking or partying, so for me this was a negative experience before I had even started. It was an awakening to what student life is for some people and how partying is a greater concern than what degree classification they receive at the end of their time at university. Do not get me wrong, if that is what people want to do, then that is their choice and they are more than welcome to it but for me, as someone that does not enjoy that aspect of life, it was a negative first impression. Going to the party was not an option for me for a variety of reasons: I didn’t know anyone at the time who was going, I didn’t know the area and I also didn’t like the idea of being surrounded by a lot of drunken people in a club. In my opinion, studying should be something that takes priority over everything else, but some people seem to have other priorities, but like I have said, who am I to tell them otherwise? If there had been another choice for a ‘Fresher’s/Welcome Week’, other than to get drunk, then I would have been more interested in it, so that I would have gotten out of my apartment more and met new people, however, there was not any other choice, so I simply stayed in.

As far as the course was concerned Welcome Week was quite structured; it followed a set timetable and we got to meet all of our course tutors, in addition to our academic tutor. This provided me with a great opportunity to familiarise myself with who I was going to be working with throughout the three years at university but also to get a sense of what was to come. The very first day that I had to go to university as part of Welcome Week was nerve-wracking; I didn’t know anyone on the course, even less what the lecturers were like. If I had known somebody who was on my course prior to starting university, I think that it would have made the transition much easier to cope with, and those first few days would have been that fraction less scary, which for someone like me would have meant a lot! I honestly don’t know how I managed to cope with all of the ‘newness’ – the unknown. I just sat myself down on the end of a row, and hoped for the best. Thankfully, nothing too drastic happened; not that it ever really would have but I got through it!

In terms of those first lectures, it would have beneficial if I had been able to meet with one or two of my lecturers beforehand. Even just seeing a face that I could look out for and recognise on the first day rather than everything and everyone to be brand new and scary would have made a difference. It would also have been useful for me if there had been something like an ice-breaker activity, which would have forced me to speak to others on the course. Although this is inherently scary for people with an ASD, and hard to cope with for some, it would be an ideal opportunity to get to know the people that you are going to
be spending three years with and might turn, those scary faces-into more friendly ones – and maybe one that you can get to know. Finally, it would also have helped me if a member of the student services team, perhaps a mentor had been more involved during those first few days, to help ease the transition.

Chris’ account

‘Silently optimistic’, I would have describe myself as ‘silently optimistic’ as I started my first week of University. Like Sisyphus, whom was cursed to forever carry a boulder up a mountain, I could only call my time in High School a trial. Finally free from the weight of carrying all the insults and bullying I received, things could only get better.

I am habitually early to everything, but on my first day I had outdone myself by arriving forty minutes early. I did this to sort out my Disabled Student’s Allowance that was in the final stages of implementation. Understandably being the first day, it was quite busy at the reception desk. I waited in line for student services and exposited my situation. I found the staff quite helpful. I received help with setting the delivery date for some of my belongings, finding my way around university and information about important things I should do, such as registering with the university doctor’s surgery. Though helpful, the staff can’t help unless you ask for it. I advise any new students to be proactive and ask for help, which is the sort of clichéd advice that is easier said than done for autistic students; however the staff were not that bad. I found turning up early advisable as well, because I only had ten minutes before the first event when I finished talking, even with my forty minute buffer.

After sorting things out at the reception desk, I went to an introductory speech. It seemed to be one of those formalities that do not add anything to the experience. After everyone got packed into the hall like sardines they gave everyone information, that is available on the website and is given to students anyway when they meet their academic tutor. Similarly, they handed out a short story that you were supposed to read before your first lecture, but it never got mentioned again. So, I guess the speech was a very important event to attend.

University is essentially very similar to High School, just with less monkeys milling about and acting like fools. Similar to my hopes, I was not bullied after I started University. Otherwise, the main difference between High School and University is with the timing of lectures. I could have tons of free time between lectures with nothing to do. This was semi-appealing, as while I could lounge around in public places or work in the library, I found myself walking back to my accommodation to eat or work, (sometimes to play video games,) because I felt uncomfortable in the crowds and there is no real reason to hang around the University.

The toughest part of the first week was the ‘Fresher’s Fair’. Any time you have a situation where you have large numbers of people congregating in a small area, you can be sure they did not have autistic people in mind. This was no exception. The fair was situated inside a sports hall, though you might have believed that it was outside, as there were quite sizeable crowds there. Despite being smart enough to get into University, they did not seem to realise that not everyone can get through the doors at once. There were so many people scurrying about it reminded me of the rat infested
barns you sometimes see in documentaries. And if the crowds are not a big enough sign to tell where the fair is, just follow the music. One stall decided to play music at battlefield volumes. You could feel the vibrations through the shiny sports hall’s floor. If someone detonated a bomb in the hall and nobody heard it, would it be a terrorist act or just a plea for them to turn the sound down? Needless to say, I found it quite ‘overwhelming’ and did not want to stay there very long.

After weaving my way into the sports hall, I was pulled along in a river of people. The stalls, similar to what you would find in a market place, offered things like tickets to clubs or discount vouchers for alcohol to perpetuate the stereotypes about University students. On the positive side they did hand me a plethora of pens too. I ran into one man wearing a Hawaiian shirt. After giving me a pointless trinket, he told me “Smiling won’t kill you,” though the bright clashing colours on his shirt possibly could. I followed the clockwise flow of people around the perimeter of the hall and back out into the open with many useless gifts. One of the main draws to the Fresher’s Fair in signing up to join a society... that you can do much more simply by going on the University’s website. I guess the first week of University was a bit of a mix of positive and negative experiences.

Daniel’s account

The day I moved into my student house was also the first day I would be introduced to my soon-to-be-housemates, and while that proposition certainly filled me with a certain amount of dread at first (as I didn’t know what kind of people I would be living with, and was worried at the idea that I might not get along with them or that they might not like me, and was also still a little apprehensive as to how I would cope living away from home, etc.) my fears quickly subsided upon my arrival, especially with regards to my first interactions with my new housemates, which I think had a lot to do with the fact we were all in the same boat; moving away from home for the first time, seemingly excited about what might lie ahead of us in terms of new experiences and the various types of academic work we would all be engaging in. I believe this shared anxiety allowed us to bond quickly and form some important initial friendships, which certainly helped to quell a few of the little worries I had about meeting new people. As a result of these allayed fears, I was hopeful and optimistic about the prospect of beginning my life as a university student armed with some new friends (in the shape of my new housemates) to keep me company.

My ground-floor room was wonderfully commodious, as was the rest of the house, and I believe that this helped to make the transition from living at home much easier for me to cope with, because I didn’t feel claustrophobic, or like I was being ‘cooped up’ in any way! I felt comfortable with my surroundings, and this in turn helped me to feel much more at ease about the giant steps I was taking in my life (i.e. by studying at university and living away from my parents for the first time).
I and my new housemates spent the subsequent couple of days getting to know our surroundings, taking trips into the city centre together and touring the campus, which helped me to become even more comfortable with my surroundings. As the first few weeks wore on, however, it became apparent to me that I wasn’t bonding as closely as I thought I would with them; neither they nor I were to blame insomuch as that I was simply not as ‘socially compatible’ with them as I thought I would be. This was most apparent in terms of the social activities that we each enjoyed, especially where going out, socialising, and alcoholic beverages were concerned. I’m not against the idea of going out for a drink with some friends but the idea of going out to get drunk has just never really appealed to me. Neither has the noisy bedlam of the nightclub environment, as I like the quiet comfort of my own room too much to go out a lot, and going to a pub is the environment in which I like to go for a drink, as they are often much quieter and smaller. This was one area in which I and my housemates differed.

I did not dismiss the idea of going night-clubbing (as this phenomenon is apparently termed!) straight away though, and it was during my first week that I decided I would attempt to participate in this personally-alien ‘social concept’ with my housemates almost as some sort of rite-of-passage by which I might also form closer bonds of friendship with them. However being a night-clubbing novice, unlike my housemates, I decided not to fork out any money for VIP passes, believing them to be a waste of money. This was a fatal mistake on my part; my housemates gleefully made their way through the front doors of the club and I my way to the back of the ever-growing queue, naively thinking that it would only be a small matter of time before I would be joining them. Half an hour passed me by and I had only moved about ten yards from where I had started, still a long way from the front doors. That was enough to tell me I was wasting my time waiting around and began the long and lonely walk back to my house, stopping off at the Student Union bar (much more like my kind of aforementioned drinking/social environment) on the way.

You might find it strange to believe that I don’t regret this experience, truth be told I am grateful for it, as it allowed me to find out and establish which social environments I felt most comfortable in and which ones to avoid. Unfortunately, the night-club episode could be regarded as the “(silent) straw that broke the camel’s back” with regards to the relationship I had with my housemates, and from then on my interactions with them were reduced to the times we would all be in the house together (when I wasn’t in my room doing work or visiting friends at their flat). That being said, I am pleased to report that despite this, we have still retained some degree of friendship and whenever I have the fortune of seeing them - be it on campus or around the city itself - we have been able to have enjoyable, if brief, conversations.

Recently, in reflecting on that particular moment of my university life, it seemed on me that the university (or at least the Student Union) didn’t appear to offer much in the way of Fresher’s week activities that would be considered ‘friendly’ for students with
Autism/Asperger’s, as it appeared to me at least, that the majority of their programme appeared to lean towards those activities that required large-scale social interaction (and often involved meeting new people on this large scale in places where the consumption of predominantly alcoholic beverages is encouraged!) However, I also believe that the university has made great strides in this area thanks to its part in setting up a group like Stratus: a group where people with Autism/Asperger’s can meet with like-minded (and similarly ‘socially challenged’) people in a quiet place on an evening, away from the bustle of university and city life. It is certainly a group that I have enjoyed attending and that I believe has helped to solidify my comfort with myself and the fact that I have Asperger’s, and I believe that advertising the presence of a group like this around the university (via posters, presence on the university website, a stall at Fresher’s fair, etc.) would undoubtedly help in letting students like myself know that there is a safe social environment in which they can be comforted in the knowledge that there are fellow students like themselves who are in the same predicaments as they are (socially speaking especially) and that there is a university-endorsed group waiting to welcome them and offer them an alternative to the hyper-busy (and often intimidating) social atmosphere that the majority of Fresher’s week activities seem to offer students as their first taste of university life.