

THE BACKPACKER'S GUIDE TO UNIVERSITY

AN UNDERGRADUATE'S GUIDE TO TRAVELLING WELL AND STAYING THE COURSE



DR JO PHILLIPS AND MARTIN GRIFFIN

PRAISE FOR *THE BACKPACKER'S GUIDE TO UNIVERSITY*

Learning journeys include sudden transitions between places – the sort of changes that can make your head spin with culture shock. *The Backpacker's Guide to University* presents a highly readable mix of tips and tricks that is deeply rooted in a wealth of experience and serious research under its calming, glossy surface.

Imagine going to a tropical beach for the first time. You can go with a professional diver who will be pointing out the most incredible creatures of the coral reef, while safely steering you around the hungry sharks and paralysing jellyfish. This book sets out a similarly safe course through academic waters: it explains things before you go, as you are on the journey, and offers help if you get in trouble. Avoiding things that bite or sting as you jump in is profoundly logical.

And let's face it, any good teacher or lecturer will tell you to read widely: to read about the subject content, read about processes, read for fun, and even read about reading. It makes total sense to take this guide with you to university – reading it will help you be more ready!

Dr Arjun Reesink, secondary school teacher and university academic

The Backpacker's Guide to University is a practical and accessible book for any student who is about to progress into higher education. It provides a clear and concise set of tips and advice on how to approach and navigate the different spheres of becoming a university student.

The book is particularly helpful for students who are unsure about what is expected of them – with useful and practical prompts, scenarios and highlights that illustrate and make explicit what one can do. The central message is for students to be open and to embrace new or different experiences, and the analogy of the backpacker promotes a transformative mindset.

Complete with tasks and activities, this guide is a comprehensive toolkit for navigating the varied slopes and terrains of student life – translating insight into actionable advice. It's an essential book to slip into your backpack on the way to university!

**Billy Wong, Professor of Education, University of Reading,
and author of *The Ideal Student***

The prospect of going to university can feel daunting – a step change in independence, autonomy and unfamiliar academic systems that may contrast sharply with school experiences. Nevertheless, for many, it becomes a rich and even transformative chapter in their life.

In *The Backpacker's Guide to University*, Jo and Martin offer practical, down-to-earth advice for new undergraduates. With a clear structure – covering pre-arrival preparation, first-term tips and 'emergency' guidance for when things feel overwhelming – the book is designed to help students not just survive but thrive. Like seasoned travellers, readers are encouraged to relish the journey, not just the destination.

Highly recommended reading for Year 13s and a thoughtful, confidence-boosting gift for friends and family members about to start university.

**Ben White, secondary school leader, education consultant
and co-author of *The Next Big Thing in Education***

The Backpacker's Guide to University is refreshingly honest about the huge difference between secondary school and university, while also introducing this new life stage as an entirely doable adventure. Phillips and Griffin serve as friendly, respectful mentors who demystify the language of higher education and suggest small but meaningful steps to help grow confidence – from weekly scheduling to handling demoralising feedback to building concentration. This book connects the practical and emotional aspects of learning to learn, and cheers on the reader to embrace the unique experience of university life. The most practical and positive guide you could wish for: 100% encouraging.

Professor Clare Rishbeth, University of Sheffield

A fantastic resource to help students shift their mindsets during the transition to university. The combination of essential information alongside practical activities will empower students and set them up for success.

Dr Jen McGahan, Senior Lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University

The Backpacker's Guide to University is an immersive, helpful roadmap to all aspects of university written by professionals who know what it's like. The experiences and advice shared by the authors relate to the struggles and worries that many students may feel, packaged into an excellent guide for this new journey of life with its solutions and reflections. The inspiring messages and engaging tasks help to develop students' confidence and help them make the most out of their time in university by empowering them to become active participants in their learning.

This book makes the prospect of going to university something to be excited about, rather than terrified. It's perfect for new undergraduates and any university students who need a bit of guidance and encouragement.

Emily Barber, sixth-form student and writer

The Backpacker's Guide to University is an invaluable resource for first-year students and the university staff who support them. It is readable and fun, but most importantly it is filled with practical and relevant activities that cover the very real experiences that so many first-year students face. With this book, as a first-year you will set yourself on the fast track to self-awareness and personal growth and will receive those key insights and pointers that many students wish they had received when starting out.

Embracing the metaphor of the backpacker's journey, the authors invite students to view university as a life adventure and encourage students to begin their next chapter with courage, curiosity and hope.

A must-read for anyone embarking on the university adventure.

**Fanie Walters, first-year lecturer and Head of Residence – Erica,
University of Pretoria**

With its straightforward and practical advice, *The Backpacker's Guide to University* is an essential resource for students embarking on their university journey.

One of the book's strongest aspects is its focus on mapping workspaces – an insightful section that highlights how environment plays a crucial role in productivity and wellbeing. The guidance on mixing, acculturating and acclimatising to a new setting is invaluable, equipping students with the tools to adjust both socially and academically. Equally impressive is the advice on how and where to get support, ensuring students feel confident in accessing help when needed. The discussions on interaction and navigating impostor syndrome further enrich the book, offering reassuring perspectives on belonging and self-confidence.

This is a much-needed book for students seeking both practical advice and emotional support during their university years. For anyone looking for a clear, actionable roadmap to settling in and thriving, *The Backpacker's Guide to University* comes highly recommended. A must-have companion for the journey ahead.

Karl Smith, Principal, Rochdale Sixth Form College

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
About Us	1
Before You Travel	3
A Backpacker's Phrasebook	9
How Is Studying at a University Different?	13
Part One: Setting Out	19
Activity 1.1: The Tourist Versus the Backpacker – Starting with the Right Mindset	21
Activity 1.2: The Packing List – Considering the Culture You're Leaving Behind	27
Activity 1.3: The Fresh Start – Committing to New Behaviours	31
Activity 1.4: Three Steps Ahead – How to Scope out New Territory	35
Activity 1.5: One Ticket at a Time – How to Start Good Habits Now	39
Activity 1.6: Make an Itinerary – Plotting the Shape of the Term Ahead	41
Activity 1.7: Map Your Workspaces – Where to Go to Work	43
Activity 1.8: Settling into Your Quarters – How to Get Your Personal Space Right	47
Activity 1.9: The Attention Economy and Your Digital Environment – How to Beat Distraction	55
Activity 1.10: All Hands on Deck – Form a Study Group	59
Activity 1.11: Scheduling Your Week – How to Get the Most out of Your Time	65
Activity 1.12: The Points of Your Compass – Who's Waiting to Help?	69
Part Two: Over the Ocean	73
Activity 2.1: How to Read	75
Activity 2.2: How to Take Notes	79

Activity 2.3: Aeroplane Settings – How to Build Concentration	83
Activity 2.4: Scanning and Planning – How to Stay on Top of Work	87
Activity 2.5: Guide or Judge? How You See Your Professor Is Important	91
Activity 2.6: The Inquisitive Backpacker – How to Ask Questions of Academics	93
Activity 2.7: Scared to Put a Foot Wrong? Why Perfectionism Is Always Unhelpful	97
Activity 2.8: The Lucky Backpacker – How to Broaden Your Attentional Spotlight	105
Activity 2.9: The Backpacker's Guide to Revision, Part One	109
Activity 2.10: The Backpacker's Guide to Revision, Part Two	115
Activity 2.11: Rerouting – How to Solve Problems and Persist	121
Activity 2.12: Off the Beaten Track – Making Connections in Your Learning	125
Part Three: In Emergency Break Seal	127
Activity 3.1: Are You Fit to Travel? When Non-Uni Problems Stop You Learning	131
Activity 3.2: Do You Feel You Belong? When Impostor Syndrome Strikes	133
Activity 3.3: Going Solo – Are You Travelling Alone?	135
Activity 3.4: Are You Lost? If You Think You Might Be on the Wrong Course	137
Activity 3.5: Missing? If You're Going to Miss, or Have Just Missed, a Big Deadline	139
Activity 3.6: Left Behind? How to Pick Up the Pace	141
Activity 3.7: Are You Stuck? Do You Feel Frozen in Fear and Like You Can't Do Any Work at All?	143
Activity 3.8: Wrong Way – When Your Feedback Feels Crushing	147
Activity 3.9: Starting Afresh – Let's Take That Again	151
Activity 3.10: Turning Back – When You're Considering Quitting	155
Arrival ... and Onward Travel	159
<i>Bibliography</i>	163

ABOUT US

Before we start, a little about us – your guides for this trip of a lifetime!

Dr Jo Phillips taught in five different sixth form colleges, then moved into higher education. She has been teaching in universities for the last fifteen years. This puts her in a rare position – she’s taught A level students and hundreds of undergraduates too. Often, university lecturers don’t have experience in school or college classrooms, and school teachers usually haven’t taught in universities. Jo has worked in both worlds. She currently teaches landscape architecture at the University of Sheffield.

Martin Griffin has spent his career teaching in three different sixth form colleges. He has been a head of sixth form and a deputy head teacher, guiding and supporting young people with their university applications. He is currently an award-winning writer of both fiction and non-fiction, and he trains teachers to help students to perform at their best.

When you add it up, between us we’ve taught A levels for thirty years, alongside various side quests into GCSEs, evening classes and primary school workshops. And we’ve also been adult students a total of eight times between us, making mistakes along the way, so we still vividly remember what it’s like to try to learn something new, deal with unfamiliar settings, figure out what the teacher expects and submit our work on time.

Most of all, we’ve helped sort out two careers’ worth of students’ problems. When you’ve been helping students for as long as we have, study-related issues become quite familiar. The same ones tend to crop up each year, and we’ve got better at advising students the longer we’ve done these jobs. This book is the outcome of that experience.

So welcome, travellers one and all, to *The Backpacker’s Guide to University*.

Website: www.backpackersuni.com



BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

THE WAY OF THE BACKPACKER

University is a journey that can be travelled in different ways. The way in which you approach this adventure determines how much learning you will get out of it, and how much you enjoy it. Two people taking the same trip might say totally different things about the experience: one seeing the whole thing as an adventure; the other treating it as an endurance test. University is an investment of time, money and effort, and we would like to see you travel well.

SO WHY BE A BACKPACKER?

Backpackers are active explorers.

They take control of their own experiences and take responsibility for where they're going and how they're going to get there. They are creative and adaptable. This flexibility means they can take chances, build relationships and discover new and better ways of doing things. Backpackers solve problems, find joy in the journey and, above all, travel with intention.

Consider this book your guide to a unique and fascinating trip. We manage to sustain the backpacker metaphor pretty well throughout, though in places the prose creaks a little, like the timbers of a three-masted schooner in heavy seas off the Azores.

But we like the metaphor for a reason. We want to help you to see that good habits are important if you wish to have an enjoyable adventure in higher education. We don't think you should be relentlessly focused on the final degree classification that you might get, because that is a reductive approach and will mean missing out on all kinds of opportunities during this exciting stage of life. We don't want you to just 'survive' university, or to feel that your grades need to be better than everyone else's. Because we don't think that's what these years should be about.

Put simply, the backpacker approach means having a small number of useful techniques at the ready, taking the initiative and entering into a true spirit of adventure. In other words, get your travel plans in order, navigate your course and strap in for the ride!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Read it in stages.

In an ideal world you would check through most of this book in the months before setting off. That way you would know what kinds of advice it contains, so you could easily dip into it whenever the need arises. But travel experiences rarely present us with an ideal world, and even though this is a short book, we know that you might not find the time. So, instead:

- Start reading Part One a couple of weeks before you go to uni and finish it a week or so into your course.
- Then start reading Part Two, aiming to complete it within the first two to three weeks of your course.
- Then briefly glance through Part Three, so that if you encounter rocky territory, you know where to turn for help! Don't dwell on this section now. It's for emergencies only.

In places we will ask you to briefly write notes, make plans or draw things, so it will be useful if you have a notebook or journal to hand.

WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

So what is this strange new landscape you'll be exploring?

For the purposes of this book, we'll say that university is an institution where research-led teaching takes place alongside the research itself.

'Research-led teaching' means teaching staff will often be actively conducting research or will practise as professionals in their area of speciality, which means you'll be spending time with experts who are prominent in their field. This could apply to a range of disciplines; you could be taught

by practising architects, artists, novelists or poets, medics, designers, lawyers, business people and so on.

Almost all UK universities are independent bodies with charitable status, so they are not run for profit. Many students will be undergraduates – meaning they are studying to gain their first degree or bachelor's.



You will hear phrases like 'Russell Group', 'The Sutton 30' and 'red brick' used to describe some universities. The first is a group of 24 institutions which between them win more than two-thirds of the research money

given to UK universities.¹ Over three-quarters of a million students study at Russell Group universities, and they attract international students as they have an excellent reputation around the world.² The Sutton 30 is a list – created by social mobility charity The Sutton Trust – of the UK's 30 most prestigious and selective universities, used to measure how many students from poorer backgrounds attend year-on-year. 'Red brick' is a looser term which derives from the architecture of 'newer' universities, first used a little snootily by the Victorians to describe unis in six big industrial cities and now applied more broadly to many universities which were founded before the 1960s. Note that 'Oxbridge' is not a university. This is an embarrassing mistake to make.

In your first year, the key parts of the university that you'll need to learn your way around will be the building where your department is located, and maybe other buildings where you will be taught, the library for your subject area and the students' union, which exists for the students' welfare and enjoyment and will offer useful facilities and services. You might be living on or near campus, in university-owned accommodation, and you might make use of campus sports facilities.

WHAT IS UNIVERSITY FOR?

It's for many things, of course, but we want to simplify a little here.

Think of it as training for the journey that is the rest of your life. In preparing for that trip, uni will give you a wonderful grounding in three areas: *independence*, *innovation* and *expertise*. You won't get to explore these in the same way via any other route. It is true that other paths in life might teach you to be autonomous or to innovate, or might give you expertise: early parenthood, for example, or starting your own business straight out of school. You might have already done these things – if so, you will perhaps agree that it is a wonderful but tough way to learn. However, university provides a stable, guided and gradual framework, allowing you to develop these capabilities. And once you have them, you are more suited to a number of roles in professional, vocational and business life.

1 See <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/who-we-are>.

2 See <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/who-we-are>.

INDEPENDENCE

Graduates tend to find work that both allows and requires increasing levels of autonomy. Rather than having their time micromanaged, graduates are often expected to work independently or in teams without close guidance. You might be sequencing and organising your own work, deciding what your next priorities are, building teams of people to get something done, then feeding back your progress. Employers want graduates because they'll get on and do things without constant supervision. Of course, you might want to become a freelancer or start your own business and be truly independent.

INNOVATION

Graduates tend to find work that requires them to solve interesting problems. They're often paid to fix or improve the way things currently work or respond to change. Those who work in education design lessons and try to improve the ways in which their classrooms are run. Those in business seek efficiencies or new customers. Those in advertising are tasked with engaging consumers or changing people's behaviours. In short, employers want graduates because they're good at finding creative solutions to important problems. Many well-paid, responsible non-graduate jobs – being a train driver, for example – might be great career options, but the opportunities for independence and innovation will be minimal.

EXPERTISE

Graduates tend to find work that requires that they learn new things and demonstrate growing skills and knowledge. Some get work that requires them to use the expertise they gained at university – a working knowledge of chemistry, how the human body works or how to design and build something, for example. Some will use their transferable skills – because university has proved that they can read and understand new information quickly or dive deep into a topic and figure it out. Employers want graduates because they have subject-specific expertise, or because they know how to get it through their finely honed study skills.

Nobody is expecting all of this from you right now, however. You have the privilege of a few years of training and experimentation, with space to make mistakes and explore your strengths and weaknesses, before making those first job applications.

A BACKPACKER'S PHRASEBOOK

This is a world with its own, often confusing, language. Here are some handy terms that you are likely to find used frequently by the locals who you'll encounter on your journeys. Learn how to use them and you can hope to pass for someone who knows what they are doing. They are organised by theme.

YOUR CLASSES

Lecture – typically a non-interactive 'lesson', with a presentation from a subject expert, usually including slides, lasting for at least fifty minutes, and conducted in a lecture theatre which might seat anything from fifty to 350 people. Students are expected to listen and take notes, and often have an opportunity to ask questions at the end.

Seminar – a discussion-based session for a small group, perhaps six to ten students, led by an academic. You will need to do reading or other work to prepare for the seminar, and you will be expected to listen to others as well as make your own spoken contributions. There's nowhere to hide in a seminar – you will be asked questions, so you must do the preparation. Seminars could be among the richest learning experiences you'll ever have.

Workshop – this is likely to involve cooperative work with other students, completing set tasks with support from a tutor. This term is used quite broadly, so it may be a theory-based workshop, in which you tackle problems or scenarios, but in subjects with a practical element it could mean actually making or designing something or learning to use equipment. Obviously, 'workshop' could also mean a type of room.

Lab – short for laboratory. Similar to a workshop, but much more likely to be a hands-on learning session. Science students will likely have a lot of lab sessions on their timetable, when they conduct experiments in a laboratory. Some social science and design-based courses also use this word, just to confuse everybody.

Tutorial – typically a one-to-one meeting with your tutor to discuss your work: either something that you are currently working on or that you have previously submitted. Tutorials can also be conducted in small

groups, perhaps with one tutor to three students, so that you can learn from advice given to your peers and see how others approach the assignment. Do listen to everyone!

YOUR TEACHERS AND PEERS

Professor – in the UK and Europe, professor is the title given to a senior academic, an expert in their field, who will be spending a lot of time doing their own research. Your contact with them is likely to be through lectures, which are a great opportunity to learn about the research work they do. Elsewhere, any academic teacher might be called 'professor'.

Academic – often used to mean any person who teaches in a university. They don't necessarily all do research, though many do.

Tutor – used flexibly to mean anybody employed by the university to teach you. This could include graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), who are usually PhD students who are doing some undergraduate teaching alongside their own research. It could also include professionals who usually work outside of the university but come in to teach specific modules or courses, perhaps one day a week. Your personal tutor is different; they are assigned to be your first point of contact for non-academic help and support.

Undergraduate – this is someone studying for their first degree, so they have not graduated yet.

Postgraduate – or postgrad – any student who already has their first undergraduate degree. Some are taught students, studying for a master's or a postgraduate diploma or certificate, for example, and some are researchers working towards a PhD.

DIVIDING UP TIME

Module – a chunk of your course that has its own learning objectives. A module usually runs for a term, or half term, and ends in an assessment, which will usually be some kind of exam or final piece of work. You are likely to be following more than one module, perhaps four of them, at a time, and will need to organise yourself.

Semester/term – you might be familiar with terms from school. Originating in the Christian calendar, there are three terms per academic year: from September to Christmas, from Christmas to Easter, and from

Easter to June, all with breaks in between. Semesters divide the academic year into two parts instead, with the first semester usually running from early October to February, with a break in December. Then it's straight into the second semester, with a break in March/April and ending around early June. Assessments can happen 'mid-term' or at the end of each semester.

Office hours – these are the times of the week when an academic will be in their office and available for students to drop by and ask for help with their work. Office hours might be quite limited, as staff could be part-time and will often be teaching, researching, in meetings or on study visits. Each academic's office hours arrangement could be different – some are happy with you dropping in whenever; others have sign-up lists. Their preference is usually indicated on their email signature and possibly on a piece of paper pinned to their office door. Make them feel useful by popping in to see them!

READING, WRITING AND ASSESSMENT

Academic journals – high-status academic magazines (often found online but the university library might have them in paper form too) which publish peer-reviewed research in very specific fields. Examples include *Weed Research*¹ or *Small*, the journal of nanotechnology.² They are useful for finding internationally significant and up-to-date research, but can be a tough read for a new undergrad.

Peer-reviewed – any published research that has been through a rigorous process of checking by other experts in the field. This is information you can trust more than Wikipedia or even BBC Bitesize, neither of which are to be cited as academic sources. Ever.

Plagiarism/unfair means – both these terms refer to cheating, perhaps by copying others' work, whether it be published or unpublished, and passing it off as your own by not crediting the authors. Your uni will have guidance on avoiding plagiarism on its website. Follow these rules. You also need to be fully aware of the rules about using AI in the course of your work. This will vary according to subject area, and quite possibly

1 See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/13653180?msocid=20109158d16867ca24298464d02566aa>.

2 See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/16136829?msocid=20109158d16867ca24298464d02566aa>.

from module to module, so you need to make sure that you know the rules, as cheating isn't tolerated, and you could be required to leave.

Summative feedback – feedback and final grades given on work submitted. You will likely be given a mark, a degree classification and written feedback to highlight the strengths and weaknesses in the work.

Formative feedback – feedback given throughout the module about how to improve your work before the final hand-in.

VLE – is a virtual learning environment. It's the go-to place for communication from your teachers. You will be given updates, resources and instructions via the VLE, and probably submit work here, too.

THE SETTING

Campus – the buildings and grounds of the university. Some are very clearly defined as a place, perhaps having a rural setting which holds all aspects of student life close together, like Keele University or Lancaster University. There are urban campuses too, like the University of Birmingham, where the uni buildings are set apart from the rest of the city. Some universities are dispersed over a wide area, but still have a campus-like feel in places because surrounding businesses cater very much to a student population – for example, on Manchester's Oxford Road.

Halls – this means student housing, and could refer to shared accommodation with catering and many individual bedrooms, shared flats owned by the university, and sometimes large apartment buildings which are privately owned, more expensive, and may have gyms, cafes and reception staff. Most students spend their first year of university living in halls.

Students' union – every university will have a students' union. The NUS – the National Union of Students – has a presence on every university campus. The union is an invaluable part of student life; it's a hub for socialising and welfare support.

One final note on vocabulary. In this book we are going to use the word 'teacher' when we want to refer generally to any person who teaches you, whether they be a GTA, tutor, lecturer, professor or anything else.

- Perhaps you reckon that your own shaky self-belief might hold you back in having a successful experience? If so, go directly to **ACTIVITY 1.3** on page 31, **ACTIVITY 1.5** on page 39 and **ACTIVITY 2.7** on page 97.

We promise that none of these pages will read, 'You have been trampled by rhinoceroses. You are dead.'



UNIVERSITY IS AN ADVENTURE WAITING TO HAPPEN AND THIS BOOK WILL BE YOUR GUIDE. OFFERING FRIENDLY AND ENCOURAGING ADVICE TO HELP YOU NAVIGATE THE JOURNEY LIKE A SEASONED BACKPACKER

Dr Jo Phillips and Martin Griffin draw on their collective 45 years' experience of teaching undergraduates and sixth formers to bring you the ultimate guide to making the most of your time at university, including the very best guidance on adjusting to university study, campus life and independent learning.

The backpacker approach means having a small number of useful techniques at the ready, taking the initiative and entering a true spirit of adventure. In other words, get your travel plans in order, navigate your course and strap in for the ride!

ESSENTIAL READING FOR STUDENTS APPLYING TO UNIVERSITY, CURRENT UNDERGRADUATES IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THEIR COURSE, AND THEIR PARENTS AND TEACHERS.

It makes total sense to take this guide with you to university – reading it will help you be more ready!

Dr Arjun Reesink, secondary school teacher and university academic

An essential book to slip into your backpack on the way to university!

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Perfect for new undergraduates and any university students who need a bit of guidance and encouragement.

Emily Barber, sixth-form student and writer

A must-read for anyone embarking on the university adventure.

Fanie Walters, first-year lecturer and Head of Residence – Erica, University of Pretoria



Dr Jo Phillips has taught in five different sixth form colleges, then moved into higher education, and has been teaching in universities for the last fifteen years. This puts her in a rare position – she's taught not only A-level students but hundreds of undergraduates too. She currently teaches landscape architecture at the University of Sheffield.

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Student life Advice on education
Careers guidance