When we think about obstacles to learning it’s easy to stop at the more obvious issues such as a learning difficulty or perhaps an illness or physical problem. On a good day we might even consider long term mental health issues, however we often forget the shorter term issues. In this article I will attempt to address some of what I think may affect students in their transition to university, and I also aim to make suggestions of ways of supporting students during this, often difficult, time.

Although it seems like a long time ago now I can still remember my first term at university, and as part of my initial thoughts for this article I reread my diary entries from that time, and immediately one huge thing stuck out. I knew I’d been badly homesick, what I hadn’t realised was the enormous impact that homesickness had on not only my emotions but also on the quality and amount of learning that took place during that time.

For me the homesickness kicked in before I even arrived at university, in a diary entry from early September I wrote:

“Well, I got my grades so I’m going to uni, I should be happy right? Somehow it doesn’t feel real at the moment, I’m trying to pack the last 18 years of my life and put it into suitcases and boxes all so I can go and live with complete strangers in a tiny room, and who knows if I’ll be able to cope with the work they set. Can someone please remind me why I decided to do this?”

Even at this early stage I was uncertain that I was doing the right thing, I felt that because I’d signed up to it through my UCAS application I had to go to university, how many of our students are in the same boat when they arrive? When you doubt whether you’ll cope with the work and lifestyle changes it’s easy to convince yourself that you can’t cope or that you can’t do the work.

My diary entry from my first day at university is also quite revealing as to how many of our students might be feeling in the first few days and weeks.

“I can’t do this, Mum left about an hour ago and I’ve not stopped crying since then. We arrived to queues everywhere; to get into the car park, to pick up keys, to register and that was hard enough to deal with. Then I got into my room, which is fine, small and not inspiring, but ok. I was met at the door by several girls who all seemed to be excited and happy to be there – so completely the opposite of me. Worse than that they all seemed to get on really well, I don’t even fit in at my flat how much worse this get can. I wish mum would come back and pick me up already.”

In my first few weeks I felt alienated from my housemates and the sessions I had with my course mates whilst a nice distraction didn’t even register on my radar, I was utterly consumed with feeling miserable, alone and overwhelmed.

So far it all seems doom and gloom, perhaps I should have included a warning at the start, for those of you who’ve read this far you’ll be pleased to know the story does end well, and my memories of later years at uni are far better. However, I estimate that I spent the first 4-6 months feeling this way, and whilst I got my work completed on time that was more through luck than judgement. During this time I engaged with all the correct things, I spent time speaking to my personal tutor, the departmental administrator, a peer mentor in my department and countless other figures within the department, I spoke to my doctor and visited the counselling service, I even spent lots of time in the chaplaincy with the friendly staff there – anything to try and stave off the loneliness and alienation. I still remember clearly the first day that I realised university life might not be so bad after all; it was the day one of my housemates admitted that she was missing home as well, and I suddenly realised that although everyone around me seemed to be happy and enjoying the freedom of living away from parents they were in a lot of cases all still struggling with homesickness as well.

I admit that my experiences were an extreme case, however it’s important to realise that if it wasn’t for the time and support of the staff at the university (counselling team, personal tutors, chaplaincy and the cleaner who came in everyday and spent lots of time talking with me) then I would probably not have completed my degree, and would have struggled making adjustments in the future. So whilst we spend plenty of time checking on students in the first week or two, and try to make the transition to university easy in terms of support for additional needs, my plea would be to also not lose sight of those who might be struggling with the concept of being away from home, there are many support mechanisms available for students, so we need to be aware of them and ensure that students are too.