

Personal Reflective Essay on My University Experience

Being reflective on my time at university is a positive one. Whilst I have encountered challenges during this time, I have overcome them and am proud of my achievements and use of the opportunities given to me during this time. University has always been a personal and professional goal of mine. Whilst the university experience I have had has exceeded my original expectations, it has also taught me more about myself and improved my self-confidence. University appealed to me originally due to the impact it can have on an individual's social mobility. University has "Traditionally, for many young people, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, it has been an enjoyable way to bridge the transition from youth to adulthood."¹ For those in middle-class or even lower-class backgrounds, the need to access university is paramount to the improvement of their socio-economic position in society. This is something that was a strong factor in my own journey to university as I wanted to improve my own socio-economic position and to enable myself to be able to obtain higher status employment as my goal has always been to become an educator.

The accessibility of university for an individual of my background would not have been possible without certain changes in the education sector in recent years. Burke for one, argues that "The landscape of higher education has undergone change and transformation in recent years, partly as a result of diversification and massification."² The presence of diversity of people and experiences is also something that I have encountered during my university experience as well as strong personal growth. In my studies I have gained specific historical knowledge which has enhanced my ability to understand this knowledge and given the potential for me to be able to relay this knowledge to others in the future in my career in the education sector. My Bachelor's Degree has given the opportunity to study a wide variety of topics from World History, Reformation Europe, The Crusading Movement and World War Studies. This has given me a broader historical knowledge and improved my ability to write about a diverse range of topics. The World History module in particular introduced me to Chinese and Russian history which is not something I had encountered before and was something that was very different to the history I had previously studied. My historical education up until this point had been primarily on European history, and therefore by learning the history of China and Russia this course helped to decolonise my historical viewpoint and expand my worldly knowledge.

By obtaining this knowledge and learning how to write strong essays on these topics it has also enhanced my writing and communication skills to be able to write a dissertation and further my study through gaining a place on a master's programme. Therefore, university has developed my academic ability and hopefully through obtaining great grades in my bachelor's degree and future master's degree it will also improve my job prospects and employability. To further my future employability prospects, I have also engaged in several leadership roles during my university experience. As Course Representative for BA History, I have engaged in professional meetings to discuss the progress of the course and also conducted surveys and questionnaires with students on their views of the course to help

¹ Hoare, Anthony, et al. Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility: The Degree Generation. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016, p.1

² Burke, Penny Jane. The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2013, p.220

improve it. By working as a mediator between staff and students, this role gave the opportunity for leadership, professional development and self-confidence to talk and relay information in meetings. This leadership opportunity gave me a chance to challenge myself alongside the challenges of the degree itself. I think it is crucial for someone who wishes to go into a leadership position in a career to have experience in leadership prior to this. Williams argues that “Leadership is not a single operation, carried out in one particular way or in one particular style.”³ Therefore, whilst it is important to gain leadership experience it is also essential to gain a variety of leadership experiences, to evaluate the different ways in which leaders operate and what leadership approach is suitable for the role. This is why I chose to establish another leadership position in my third year of university. Whilst continuing my role as Course Representative, I decided to take on the role of History Society President in the Student Union. I had been a member of the society since my first week at university and decided that if I lead it I could help organise events, social activities and enhance the society further.

Becoming the President in my third year of university also brought its own challenges including time management. Balancing writing a 15,000-word dissertation and organising fun social events for members of a society was a challenge but a good one. I had to organise the society events to ensure that at least two members of the leadership committee were available to host and attend the events to make sure they ran smoothly. Secondly, I had to make sure that these events didn't occur in key periods of university assignments for any members especially those completing dissertations. As part of this I successfully co-hosted a History Society Christmas Quiz, with both students and History Department Staff attending and having a great time. There was also a trip to the Civil War Museum as well as a Boat Ball that had to be organised effectively to ensure all members could access these events and be catered for in terms of access requirements, food preferences or needs and that money was managed to ensure the events were fully covered and funded. As the leader of the society it was my responsibility to ensure everyone was happy and content with the events and their running. I also personally made the decision that there would only be 4 big events spaced out over the course of the year to ensure that too much wasn't taken on. To me that time management and arrangement is what made me a good leader. I knew what I could handle and didn't want to overexert myself and let others down. Managing my society's leadership team and organising meetings as a team also helped with the running of the society. Having my own team to manage was a great experience and a great learning curve. It also gave me a chance to understand what it's like to work as part of a department in preparation for a career in teaching should I be successful in the future.

As I am aspiring to become a History Teacher in the next few years, I also decided that as well as my degree I needed to gain experience in schools so I could understand what it's like to work in that environment and what it's like to support students in classroom settings. Whilst this was not part of my university experience, it did impact on my university experience and the way I perceived certain things. For example, a large part of my research was on British History during my degree and especially my dissertation was on Scottish History which has become a love of mine. It is not something I had previously studied before university and so was a new and exciting venture of research. Also, from what I have

³ Williams, James. *Professional Leadership in Schools: Effective Middle Management and Subject Leadership*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2013. P. 20-30

experienced in the schools, working part time as a teaching assistant, I have realised that Scottish history doesn't seem very apparent. This is something in the future I would like to introduce my own students to as I believe the need to learn a 'British History' rather than an English one is necessary given the current climate and the changes to the United Kingdom's structure. By having the experiences of learning this new knowledge and establishing how I would like to implement this in my own career path it has given me new insights into the leadership and types of teaching I would like to engage in. Ian Phillips expresses that this experience is crucial to becoming a teacher: "To develop your ideas about professional identity and to get you into 'reflective mode' it is worth starting with what you feel knowledgeable about in order to provide a practical framework or background for your critical reflection."⁴ Therefore, to me it would seem like a waste to not use the knowledge I have learned and loved about Scottish History and to relay this to my own students in my own classroom.

My learning experience during university has also expanded my ability to do a variety of projects. University gave me the opportunity to do group based research and projects to which I hadn't really done prior to university. In my first year my peers and I created informative posters on the Tudor Rebellions which included one poster per monarch's reign. These posters received a 1st grade mark and were placed in an exhibition of work in the university library. Whilst this project required a lot of hard work and research, seeing the posters on display for all students to see was a proud moment. Teamwork is an essential part of any working environment and so by having the chance to work on this skill even as early as my first year of university was a great challenge and one, I believe I did well in. The variety of projects and assignments that had to be completed also gave the opportunity to test skills and knowledge and present this in many forms of media. There were projects that required presentations, and these were a real personal challenge. At the start of university, I used to get so nervous about presenting that I would panic and shake. Now as I look towards the end of my university experience I feel more confident presenting to large groups, demonstrating that although it was a daunting experience it has improved my ability to a huge extent.

Other projects were written tasks but in differing forms for example, essays, reports, articles and posters. The ability to be able to adapt my writing skills and presentation based on the different forms and their intended audience was also challenging and something I had never really considered prior to the university experience. Therefore, by having the opportunity to adapt to these different writing forms challenged and improved my writing ability. The ability to adapt to different projects has also aided my professional development outside of university. I have recently embarked on a role as a Freelance writer and therefore, I have been able to apply what I have learnt about completing varying projects, to taking on paid projects. Thus, my professional ability has improved dramatically since the beginning of my university experience as the skills and attributes I have acquired have allowed me to gain paid employment in a field that I enjoy working in rather than just working in retail like I was before university.

⁴ Phillips, Ian. *Teaching History: Developing as a Reflective Secondary Teacher*. United Kingdom, SAGE Publications, 2008.

As well as professional challenges I have also had to overcome personal circumstances during my degree which have also helped me grow as an individual. Whilst I had difficulties with my home life, I had to learn to put these aside and concentrate on doing well in my degree. As my aim was to go to university to improve my socio-economic situation, I couldn't let these types of problems hinder my university experience or my ability to do well in assignments. Whilst this was essential, I also learnt that it is important to communicate any problems to those in the position to help me such as my personal tutor and student well-being team. Learning to balance the personal and professional lives was a key attribute I needed to learn at university and will benefit me in the long-term in a professional career.

Overall, university has had a very positive impact on my life and on my development both personally and professionally. By obtaining my degree I have opened a gateway towards professional employment and career development. By learning skills such as leadership, time management and adaptability I have been able to prove that I can take on jobs as a Teaching Assistant and as a Freelance writer to both improve my socio-economic situation and to stimulate my working experience.

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