

More than just a degree: stories of empowered students



We have news for you.

Universities have changed and so have the students who study there – and not in the way you might think.

We refute notions of lazy students, unresponsive universities and unsatisfied employers and we have the stories to prove it.

They are stories of universities without borders – providing a multi-dimensional, incredibly broad environment. And of empowered students – dynamic, entrepreneurial, focussed – making the most of the endless possibilities on offer to learn, explore and grow.

Politicians and commentators quite rightly ask what we are getting in return for the investment in universities and universities haven't always been good at explaining or demonstrating this. This is partly because the very aspects that are so valuable and unique about universities, that make the investment so worthwhile, can often seem intangible.

Here at University Alliance, an organisation bringing together 23 UK universities with government and business, we wanted to find a better way of describing it; so we asked the students.

Over the course of six months we interviewed students from a number of Alliance universities. We wanted to find out what made them tick, what they wanted from life and to learn more about the ups and downs of their journey through university and

beyond. What emerges is a diverse picture of rich experiences driven by the unique aspirations and choices of each individual student.

Their stories are about so much more than lectures, seminars and essays. They are about building confidence, taking ownership and making the most of what is on offer: saying 'yes' at pivotal moments; exploring and shaping a broad learning environment; doing research on the shoreline; delivering a multi-national project; stepping into professional practice; endless opportunities at university and beyond. These students are fully in the driving seat to gain the education they need and to shape the experience that they want from their time at university.

It is often asked whether graduates are being adequately prepared for their future careers and the world around them. As these stories show, forward-thinking universities like the members of University Alliance consistently ask themselves the same question as they shape, plan and develop the experience they offer. They are coming up with innovative solutions to equip their students for the challenges ahead.

Saying 'yes' at pivotal moments

Amy Guy, M(Comp) Web Technology, University of Lincoln

When I was at school, writing and designing websites was always a hobby, but I did completely unrelated A' levels. Everyone expected me to go to Cambridge and do chemistry or languages or something but I thought - No! I am going to go and do computing at Lincoln. I had looked around carefully and resolutely decided that I liked their web technology course best and that was where I wanted to go.

With hindsight I can track the university experience I have had back to pivotal moments. Through high school I was quite reserved and I didn't have a great sense of adventure. I was always very hesitant about risk taking. But as soon as I got to university something clicked – and I thought I just want to do things and not worry about the consequences, just make a few jumps. I have more of a can do attitude now. I am reasonably sure there is a way I can change the world... and I will keep saying yes to things until I get there.

One of the first times I put this into practice was in the first year. Someone asked me to help raise money for their trip to India and I said 'I don't just want to raise money, can I come too?' I ended up spending two weeks in India with the charity People

First India. They fund education for vulnerable children.

I think we need to make a big deal of the fact that all these opportunities are there at university and that you have to make the most of them. For example, I joined the Women in Technology Society, where I met two really good mentors - a Professor and a PhD student. Through them I went to a couple of conferences and ultimately I got a placement with Google through someone I met at a conference.

I learned the value of going out and networking and meeting people in this industry.

The staff in my department support this approach too. They are all forward thinking and want to get people involved. This is the focus of the Students as Producers work at Lincoln that I am involved with. It is about changing education, and the psychology behind learning at university. It makes learning more meaningful if you are actually learning by doing rather than by being told.

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Another thing I have been able to make use of is 'Enterprise at Lincoln,' a company under the umbrella of the university. It is for start-up businesses, for students and recent graduates. The rent is cheap and business advice and all the amenities are included in the price. I know this because I started a company with two of my friends who are media students. They make films and make most of their money from adverts on YouTube - I am the web developer!

If I was to give advice to someone who was going to university for the first time I would say don't say no to opportunities even if they are scary. But also don't say yes to everything because you will drown (that is the one I struggle with!) Look at everything that your university has to offer and take charge of your own journey.



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Exploring and shaping a broad learning environment

Carl Lewis, BSc (Hons) Computer Forensics, University of Glamorgan

When I went to university I went from being a big fish in a small pond to finding my way in this wider community. In college you tend to be taught by maybe three or four teachers, five tops - it's very 'this class' or 'that class'. Whereas at university it's a much wider support structure – you've got your lectures, your tutorials, other people working on the course, you've got the union. You're expected to be a lot more independent but you have a lot more support outside of the classroom as well.

You definitely need to have a sense of independence. You can't just expect everything to be handed to you, you've got to go out there and see what's available. I'm really enjoying being part of the union, doing the Student Voice Representative scheme, having that experience. University isn't just a stepping stone to get a job but somewhere I can learn a lot.

As a Student Voice Representative I coordinate feedback from individual course representatives and take it to faculty board meetings. Basically we find out what's going on and raise issues that students are concerned about. I like the fact that you are helping other students and that my input is improving other students'

courses as well as my own. It should generally improve the standard of learning and overall satisfaction with the quality of the university. Getting involved makes you more confident about approaching academic staff - I have got more experience of how the university is run and it is great to see that your opinions are genuinely listened to.

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I am studying computer forensics, which is essentially finding evidence on computers that can end up being presented in court. But for the course you need a wide grounding in computing: networks, programming, how a computer works along with the forensic and security side of things. You need a decent understanding of maths too.

The fact that our tutors are involved in research is very important, especially in the world of computing because everything is moving so fast. Another good thing is that some of our forensics teachers work on proper cases. They work out in the real world so they can bring their experience

back to us. It is a lot better to learn from someone who is actually doing something rather than someone who has just read about it.

The whole experience has definitely made me want to learn more so I can climb higher but I am also aware that when I leave it won't be the end of me learning. It is not just the skills and

knowledge that I've learnt during my course. It is about how to think and how to go on learning new things.

Researching on the shoreline

Sophie Cousens, MRes Marine Biology, University of Plymouth

Thinking about my degree and my experience at university, it has been about just going and getting on with it - trying things out, doing and learning at the same time.

I wanted to be a Marine Biologist from very early on. We used to go to Florida when I was young and we often went to Sea World. I decided that I wanted to be a dolphin keeper and our friends that lived out there said, "well they've all got Marine Biology Degrees you know!" Now I am older I have become more realistic about what I want to do, but I have still stuck with Marine Biology.

At school they were set on me doing a straight biology degree and they just didn't understand that Plymouth was the best place to do what I wanted. I had to find that out for myself. When we went down for the initial open day they told us about all the different places they had partnerships with - and nowhere else could have said that. It is so marine-based down there; there is the Plymouth Marine Science Partnership which involves so many different scientific institutions. My Masters is run jointly with the Marine Biological Association and even as an undergraduate you can become a member there and have use of the library. When I chose

Plymouth I realised that I wanted the whole lifestyle. I wanted to live the life of a Marine Biologist and be surrounded by it!

My undergraduate degree took three years and it was very hands on, so coursework would often be about data collection on the shore rather than writing an essay. One of my favourite moments was when we were on a field course in Portugal. Someone was paddling in the sea when this huge jellyfish came in. One of the lecturers jumped in. He was pointing out everything about it and relating it back to our lectures. For him it is about any opportunity to teach us something. He is like one of those teachers at school that you will never forget because he is so passionate about what he does.

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We have lecturers who are active in interesting and important fields like climate change. They are very active in doing research and you get a good feel for how the academic community works. It is not just about writing

textbooks, they actually tell us how research progresses and how we can get involved with it. At postgraduate level we work even more closely with the academics and scientists based at the marine laboratory. They treat us like we are part of the team rather than students.

I am interested in eco-toxicology, so my MRes project will hopefully be on the level of toxicity from a chemical they use to clean up oil spillages. The chemical itself is toxic and could be doing more harm than good. I want to do something for my project that is really useful and practical. My dad is excited because he thinks I can go and work for an oil company!



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Delivering a multi-national project

Philip Cooper, MBA, University of Hertfordshire

The first time I went to university, it was straight from school to study materials science so I could become an engineer. After university I had several years in industry before I came to a point where I wanted more of an overview of business. I wanted to understand finance and marketing and why managers and leaders did certain things. I wanted to get out of my niche area in a technical job and expand my future opportunities.

I chose an MBA at the University of Hertfordshire because it has a lot of business involvement. There is the Collective Enterprise Module where you do a real life project for a business, the dissertation where you go into a company as a consultant and the fact that the academics leading the course have business backgrounds themselves.

The Collective Enterprise Module has been a particular highlight. There were different placements on offer and students were placed in groups according to their strengths. My group was given IBM and we worked with a team of students from Fordham University in New York.

Our project was focussed on 'smarter cities', developing solutions that IBM could offer cities to manage law and

order or transport. We started by visiting IBM in London to get their take on where things were going. Then we had a talk from Transport for London and they gave some ideas about what we could look for and how IBM could help them. We also had a visit to the police training centre at Hendon, where they talked to us about policing and preventative work.

The crowning point was the presentation to IBM in New York – if they were happy we had produced the goods, the project would count as a success. If they weren't happy, we would have failed. This is very true to life, where you do months of work and it all comes down to the final presentation to leave an impression.

The MBA has given me the self-confidence to go into a situation that I might know very little about and handle it. I have got rid of that limiting belief that I am just the 'tech guy' or the 'plastics guy.'

The project had plenty of challenges: sometimes we were leading, sometimes following, sometimes managing and sometimes being managed. Doing a project on that scale, on something I previously knew nothing about, then to go to New York, speak to three high level directors and get through the presentation was a

real feather in the cap for all concerned.

The MBA has given me the self-confidence to go into a situation that I might know very little about and handle it. I have got rid of that limiting belief that I am just the 'tech guy' or the 'plastics guy.' I am not an accountant but I can talk to finance people; I am not a marketer but I know when a marketing plan looks good or bad; I am not a CEO but I understand business strategy. It is not about being able to tell those people how to do their jobs, it is about being able to work with them and if needs be, lead them and manage them. That is exactly why I wanted to do the MBA.

Stepping into professional practice

Alistair Mills, Bar Professional Training Course, Northumbria University

I've wanted to be a lawyer for quite some time. When I was fifteen, my grandmother took me to the law courts and I saw some cases. There were lots of people thinking on their feet - it was very dynamic and exciting. I went on to do an undergraduate degree at Cambridge followed by a postgraduate degree at Oxford, both in law.

A couple of months into my undergraduate degree I decided I wanted to be a barrister rather than a solicitor. Solicitors do things that I definitely can't do; they're much more organised than me for a start! But they don't necessarily engage day in, day out with the nuts and bolts and the cutting edge of the law.

I'm now at Northumbria completing the Bar Professional Training Course, which is mandatory in order to become a barrister. The course is very tightly regulated by an external body, the Bar Standards Board, to make sure we have the professional skills we need to be a barrister.

Doing a professional course is like opening the door and looking out into the real world. It's quite different to the other university courses I have done and I feel that it's a field in which you need a guide. For that it's important to


have someone who has been there or who at least has some idea about what you're going to be doing in the profession. Most of the tutors at Northumbria are practising barristers, so that's a big advantage because they're actually doing the stuff that you are learning about. The university also brings in specialists in particular areas of law and legal practice to run additional sessions and mock trials.

It is all good for building confidence that you can do the job. Not only do you learn how you would speak to a judge, how you would address them, what you would say to them but also – and just as important - how to deal with clients.

As well as being taught by practising barristers, the course is practically focussed on supporting you to become a barrister. The whole thing is really hands on as a large part of the course is about doing the job and learning alongside your colleagues. In our student practice sessions, we practise the skills that will be expected of a barrister. So I might make a practical application to a judge, I might cross-examine you, I might negotiate with you, I might draft a legal document, or I might get one of the documents that I've drafted checked over by one of the tutors.

It is all good for building confidence that you can do the job. Not only do you learn how you would speak to a judge, how you would address them, what you would say to them but also – and just as important - how to deal with clients. You don't learn about these things as an undergraduate; you have to try them in practice and that is exactly the opportunity that this course provides.

The next step for me is to undertake a year's paid pupillage at chambers in London – which you could see as a year-long interview! It is all about them assessing if you can cut it as a barrister. It will be about putting all of the knowledge and skills I have picked up along the way into practice, as well as learning a great deal more I should imagine!



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Endless opportunities at university and beyond

Chantelle Holt, BA (Hons) Architecture, Oxford Brookes University

I don't want it to sound like a sob story or anything but I grew up on a council estate so there weren't many opportunities. Probably the most important thing to happen to me was to get a place at the nearby technology college – one of the first academies. It meant I had the pick of universities to choose from because I got really good grades. I went to Oxford Brookes because its Architecture Course has such a high standing in the industry. Many of the tutors are practising architects and we were regularly visited by industry 'gurus'.

I was so hyped up when I got to university. I was looking forward to joining lots of societies, to learn and to grow in lots of different ways. I would tell anyone going to university to go to all the freshers' stalls and keep an eye on the university website because there is loads of stuff you can get involved with. If there is something you want to do, it is probably out there.

Architecture is one of most intensive courses alongside medicine, so you are under constant time-pressure. It's a big change from school in that way – a kind of baptism of fire in terms of time management. But saying that, I was doing a lot - I was also

running a newspaper, making a whole series of films and working part-time. So it is probably no surprise that time was such a hot commodity.

It is great finding out that the techniques and creative approach to doing things that you learned at university can be applied at work. It has been very exciting seeing my designs become reality!

There is so much to do if you are willing to put yourself forward and give it a go. I particularly liked taking the independent study modules as you could complete your own research and develop ideas in the areas you were interested in. Through one of these I applied for some research funding from the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research. You could apply for funding to do research and have articles published in their journal. I was awarded £2000 to develop some work focussing on different film techniques used to represent architecture.

I've had two jobs since I graduated as part of the professionally accredited placement year you need to qualify. Both have been with firms I did optional work experience with while I was still at university. The first was with a firm called Green Planning Solutions and my current firm is BHM Architects

– they specialise in school design. It is great finding out that the techniques and creative approach to doing things that you learned at university can be

applied at work. It has been very exciting seeing my designs become reality!

Whatever happens in my future career I know I have had a great grounding – I have gained so many skills that I can use in different ways. The main thing I have learned is to be a go-getter; there are an amazing number of opportunities out there you just have to jump on them!

The Alliance story

University Alliance represents 23 major UK universities who work closely with business to deliver world-class research and a high quality student experience.

Alliance universities educate 25% of all UK students and achieve some of the highest graduate-level employment rates. They are often the largest postgraduate provider in their region with a strong emphasis on access to the professions.

Alliance universities have a global focus: attracting high proportions of international students, delivering considerable trans-national education and working with partners around the world.

Alliance universities have innovation and enterprise running through everything they do and deliver - the courses they offer; their leading graduate prospects; the impact of their research; how they work with business, the professions and the community; the leading role they play in building regional economies; right down to the way they are run.

They are universities without boundaries: delivering economic and social growth through dynamic links joining their research, students and staff with the world around them – locally, nationally and internationally.

Through evidence-based policy and research, University Alliance and our member universities aim to improve policymaking in higher education to the benefit of the UK economy and society.

Our ambition is to work closely with government and business to help achieve a world-leading, enterprising and innovative higher education sector that:

- provides an explicit and clear offer to students, business and society
- is at the centre of the UK's growth strategy
- delivers graduates that will drive our future international competitiveness
- fosters a world-class, dynamic and innovative research base
- supports and enables genuine partnership between universities and business
- offers a broad and deep learning experience for students
- provides a quality offer for students
- enables social mobility and inclusion
- shapes a proactive, engaged and democratic society

Our vision: more than just a degree

Deciding to go to university is a major decision to invest in your own future – more so now than ever before. That is why we, as 23 universities from across the UK, are signing up to this vision. We want to be absolutely clear about our offer to you and show you this is an investment worth making.

Going to university is about so much more than a degree. It has the potential to be life changing. The vision is about placing you at the centre of your learning. Our job is to create an environment that is rich and diverse so that you can choose your own path. You will leave with a unique set of experiences enabling you to access the career you want. You are in the driving seat.

Whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate, a full-time or part-time, a UK or international student this is about...

Empowered enterprising students...

...share and shape the experience that you and fellow students will have

...explore with academics who are at the forefront of new discovery

...access knowledge from cutting-edge research, business leaders and the professional community

...direct involvement with research-led innovation, delivering solutions for business, not-for-profits and the public sector

Universities without boundaries...

...beyond the classroom; a wider variety of learning experiences so that you leave with a unique set of skills and knowledge

...placements allowing you to test and develop the ideas you learn and explore at university

...confidence that you are part of a university that attracts active partnerships with national and multi-national employers

...a culture of social responsibility, where you can contribute to society at large and make a difference from day one

A global experience...

...academics with international recognition for their research tackling big global issues

...study material with international relevance and significance

...study alongside students and academics from all over the world

...international placements giving you experience to stand out from the crowd

All that you need to succeed after university...

...professional accreditation, enabling you to access the career you want

...learn what it takes to succeed after university with on the job learning and programmes based on advice from top employers

...employment support beyond university to get the help you need

...skills and support to start your own business

Alliance universities

Bournemouth University has one of the **highest graduate employability rates** in the UK at 91%

DeMontfort University's Product Development Centre has a **world-class** reputation designing products for Adidas, Berghaus and Guinness and other leading brands

Every course at the University of Hertfordshire is developed with **input from employers**

The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) recruits international students from **125 countries**

Developed with major blue-chip companies, **'WOW'** (World of Work) is a unique program integrated across the curriculum at Liverpool John Moores University

The University of Huddersfield's Business Mine supports students to experiment with **entrepreneurial ideas** creating new start-ups

University of Lincoln and Siemens have jointly built the **UK's first** purpose-built School of Engineering in more than 20 years

75% of FTSE 100 companies have sponsored their staff to study with the Open University

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School's **sandwich placements** on all UG courses boost chances of getting a 2:1 or a first by 31%

Northumbria University has created more than **200 business start-ups** in the past 5 years

The University of Plymouth is home to the **largest Marine Institute** in Europe - with £25m recently invested in a new world-class marine facility

'The Hive' at Nottingham Trent University has helped **establish more than 100 businesses** since 2001 - almost 90% are still in operation today

Oxford Brookes University is a **leading UK provider** of CPD for teaching, healthcare and architectural professions

The University of Portsmouth is home to the **largest dental academy** in the UK

75% of the University of Salford's undergraduate courses give students the opportunity to complete a work or study placement - at home or overseas

Sheffield Hallam University works with around **59** professional bodies, and business and industry leaders including Sony, BP, NHS, Cisco and Microsoft

89% of University of Glamorgan's business customers were very satisfied with their services

Teesside University was the Times Higher Education's **'University of the Year'** for 2009/10

The University of the West of England is a leading business-engaged university - **3,400 interactions** with **1,125** business and community organisations

Around **70%** of the University of Bradford's courses are professionally accredited

The University of Wales, Newport was rated the best University in Wales for entrepreneurship for three years running by the **Knowledge Exploitation Fund**

Aberystwyth University offers the **best all-round student experience** in the country according to the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey

Glasgow Caledonian University offers **work experience for 5,000 students** each year and has introduced a university-wide approach to employability and enterprise

