

# **In with the bricks, or how a building can make a difference**

Lockdown taught us that you don't really need to be somewhere physically to get the work done, right? History student Olivia might disagree.

When I started university, I didn't really spend much time in the William Robertson Wing – the home of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, or HCA as it's usually known. In the beginning I got lost one too many times, and gave up on it because the Undergraduate Common Room intimidated me, and the lift was out of service when I wanted to go to the research room and didn't want to climb the stairs. So I found myself mostly in the main library feeling entirely anonymous. But now, almost all my time is spent in the HCA building, and I see and interact with the same people every day. A degree as large as history can be a little daunting, but the HCA building provides a small, tight-knit community within the larger University community which makes that a little easier.

## **A typical day, untypical places**

I usually start my days early. I wake up around 6 or 6:30am and go for a run around the Meadows or around Holyrood Park (though in reality, it's pretty stop and go because there are lots of very friendly dogs out in the morning and I miss my dog at home a lot). When I get back, I take a quick shower, get myself ready for the day, eat some breakfast, and head off to HCA where I will inevitably realise I'd left a book I needed for class in the ever-growing pile of books on my desk at my flat. C'est la vie!

I usually get to HCA around 9am and head to the Student Research Room on the third floor for the first part of my day. When I get there, I wave at my friend Josh, and get settled in at my favourite desk (second from the door on the left). I usually



like to make a list on Monday of everything that I need to get done for the week and then set in on everything that I have to do. Inevitably, I will have a lot of thoughts and feelings about whatever it is that I'm reading for whichever seminar, and I will drag Josh into the hallway to gesticulate wildly about female poets in the *Gàidhealtachd* (an article by Anne Frater), or about a Medieval Islamic medical case study (an article by Cristina Alvarez-Millan), or Lidl being out of my favourite pasta shape (it can be a very hard life).

At around 1pm, unless I've had a seminar, I'll head down to the common room which is usually just picking up as everyone else comes down for their lunch break as well. I'll generally set my things down at the best desk in the common room (in front of the window second from the left) and settle in for about an hour with a group of my friends. Generally, I don't get into the lunch debate that plagues every University of Edinburgh student, but sometimes I dabble and will get a wrap from Nile Valley (not African Wrap because they don't marinate their aubergines the same way). I usually take about an hour for lunch, but my friend Ellie and I often have some kind of shenanigan going on that we loop the other in on (and very often get complained about on The Tab).



After lunch, I bid my friends in the common room farewell and I put my headphones on and face the window. I'll usually do my more intense work in the morning in the quiet of the research room and save my less intense work for the common room, so I often end up writing my dissertation in the afternoons or catching up on some work.

In the evenings, I try to take it easy. I generally leave HCA around 5 or 6pm, and I usually spend the evening making dinner and watching something dumb on television or reading. But on Mondays I have History Society meetings (a society I've been involved with since my first year and which has really helped me get to know my peers), once a month I have 'girls night' with my neighbours (who I only got the chance to meet because they're also in the History Society), and every so often I'll stay late in the building to finish my dissertation work (with the help of friends who are actually largely distracting though there's no one I'd rather be distracted by).

## **The HCA Community**



Being an HCA student and having these spaces reserved specifically for HCA people is really special and I cannot imagine my university experience without it. With the amount of time I spend in the building, I've gotten to know my degree much more intimately than I think I would have had I not spent so much time here. I've been able to make lasting connections with faculty because I am just always around. Whether it's been that I often ride the lift up with the same people, or I'm closer to office hours, I have really valued my time hanging out with lecturers and getting to know them more personally than we really get to in seminars.

I have also made lasting friendships through HCA. There is a definite group of us who spend every day at HCA doing the same things with the same people, and by virtue of proximity, we've been able to build these connections that have lasted years. It is a lovely thing to know that your space is a space you can share with your friends and with people who are just as excited about their degrees as you are about yours.

Being in HCA and being part of the little HCA community who spends all their time in the HCA building means that I know my friends are perfectly willing to have me gesticulate wildly at them about whatever I'm currently reading, and be frustrated alongside me that a text I need isn't available in English,

and stay late with me in the common room for moral support while I struggle through my dissertation. Having access to the HCA building has made my degree feel much smaller, despite being a huge programme, and it has made me feel much more at home in the space I spend so much of my time in.

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## **So, you've decided to study a joint honours degree ...**

**Twice the fun or double the trouble? Student Ambassador Aalish is studying a joint honours degree.**

I made the choice to study Chinese and History simply because I love learning a language and history has always had a soft spot in my heart. Studying a language alongside history presents its own unique challenges, not only from each subject itself, but also when they are combined together. But what is it actually like to study a joint honour degree at the University of Edinburgh? I'm going to talk you through what a general day in my life looks like as well as talking about the how your degree could be structured and what your classes could be like!

### **The practical stuff**

Most days my classes start at 10am. It is very rare that I start much later (apart from a Tuesday where for some reason I have one class at 4pm!). Usually, I have around three or four classes a day, which I like to point out is a lot, but this is because I am studying a non-European language. Generally, at the University of Edinburgh, Chinese, Japanese, Russian and

Arabic have a lot more contact hours than European languages because they are just so different to English. If you choose to study a European language you will likely have more classes than your peers who study a straight history degree, but not to the extent where you have 15 hours of class a week like me!



The student research rooms.

Starting at 10am I don't usually leave the university campus until 5pm most days. I like to do the majority of my work at University so I can relax at home with my flatmates. My day mainly consists of language classes with the odd history class thrown in. I spend three hours at classes across the campus and for the rest of the time I prefer to study in either the School of Literatures, Languages & Cultures or in the Student Research Rooms in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. This is a small library that only those who study history, classics or archaeology courses can access and it has little marble Greek statues around it!

Studying history mainly involves a lot of reading. For each history course you generally get two hours of lecture and a one-hour tutorial. The lectures will have a lot of people in them and you will all be listening to a lecturer talk about the topic you are studying. It goes without saying that you should be taking notes as the lecturers can say a lot about each of the topics as this is often their area of special interest and study, and so you have to develop the skill of notetaking. This involves actively listening and deciding what

is important or relevant information, and generally does not involve copying from the presentation as you will be able to access this information throughout the duration of your course.

Tutorials are smaller groups of about twelve students where you discuss the topics you have been learning about in your lectures. Most tutorials require you to do pre-reading and so you discuss these readings in the tutorials with your peers and instructor (who is usually either a PhD student or a lecturer) alongside discussing any proposed questions that were suggested on the tutorial worksheet. Doing these readings is really important as it is good practice for writing your essays. When it comes to writing an essay, you need to have done a lot of academic reading in order to back up your claims and argument – this means you need to know what is useful and what is not, which you can practice in doing the readings for your tutorials. The most important thing I would like to tell you is to learn to read well – it will really help you in your studies of history!

## **The good bit**

Studying a language is quite different to studying history. First off there is much less reading which can prove to be a nice break from all the reading surrounding history. In Chinese, Russian, Japanese and Arabic you tend to get more classes than the European languages but you will definitely have quite a few classes ranging from grammar, reading and writing to listening to lectures and, of course, oral classes. Oral classes are usually around six people, with a tutor who is a native to the language. These are my personal favourite classes because you get to apply what you know into practicing speaking with your peers, which I always find fun, plus, often you get to make up fun stories with your classmates!

Generally, I prefer tutorials in either History or in Chinese because I like to have a more of a classroom type setting like

you have during high school. Saying this, I have had some really interesting lectures that I wished went on for much longer than their allotted time because it was just so interesting. The most recent one being a lecture on photography and its global influence. It really challenged a lot of my perceptions about the use of photography in history and I thoroughly enjoyed it! At university you get a wide choice in the courses you do so if there is something that interests you, I recommend choosing a course that covers this. But if you think this would be the most boring lecture to ever exist, make sure not to choose a course that covers this! Choose anything you think will really interest you and I am sure you will enjoy most, if not all, of the course.

Perhaps the best part of doing a history degree with a language, though, is the guaranteed year abroad in the country of the language you are studying. This is something I am really looking forward to as a day in my life next year will look a little different when I am studying Chinese and History in China.

## **All work and no play?**



A view of Edinburgh from Calton Hill at sunset

Now you've probably gathered that I really like my degree and I probably sound like a little bit of a nerd, but I promise I do other things outside of studying! Most evenings, I spend



time with my flatmates and friends across the city, sometimes going out into the pubs and clubs of the city, sometimes out to the cinema, or even sometimes on a walk around the city. Don't knock it! Edinburgh is a beautiful city both during the day and the night and one evening I happened to see the northern lights from Calton Hill!

On top of this I am involved in a few societies. The History society is a big society for everyone who studies history or has an interest in history, and through this I play football at the weekend with the Edinburgh Woman's History Football Club. I really love this and it is such a fun way to get to know others who like to play this sport but also study history and also one of the cheapest ways to play football! I am also a committee member on another society and frequently attend other societies such as the salsa society.

If you are thinking about doing joint honours History with a language, I would highly recommend it! Overall, I would say a day in my life can be very busy, but dividing my time between history and Chinese helps to keep me interested and motivated.

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## **A day in the life... Scarlett**

Scarlett is a 4<sup>th</sup> year History and Politics student and she's going to take you through a typical day in her life to give you a taste of what it might be like to study at the University of Edinburgh!

# It's Wednesday, February 2nd...

8.00am – Typically when I wake up and the first thing to do is grab a cup of tea and breakfast. I can't say that I'm always waking up this time or getting up right when my alarm goes off at 8.00 but I do have some mid-semester deadlines coming up so its up and at 'em for me!

9.30am – I have arrived at the School's Student Research Rooms, a study space reserved for History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA) students. After last year in the midst of a full lockdown it feels amazing to be able to come back on campus and enjoy these beautiful study spaces once again. I'd say we're pretty lucky in HCA to have a study space just for us that is so atmospheric. There's a huge glass ceiling over the space letting the sun shine through and I see so many familiar faces studying in the space as well. For the next few hours I'll be working on one of my chapters of my dissertation in Medieval history.



The Student Research Rooms.

12.00pm – My friend and I head out to one of our favourite coffee shops next to campus, Thomas J Walls, for some lunch. There are so many great food and coffee spots right on or next to our campus but today I was really feeling their avocado toast (they do it particularly well). As it's so close to our

building we run into several members of staff including the head of History and have a quick conversation. One thing I've always loved about the school is how welcoming and positive members of staff are. I feel that over the years I've really been able to cultivate positive relationships and found that they have been so supportive when I reach out for help!



Thomas J Walls hot chocolate  
– how good does that look?!

1.00pm – And we're are back in the Research Room! For the next few hours I'll just be doing some readings for my special subject course 'Early Medieval Sexualities c.500-1000'. Our next seminar is discussing Monastic purity and clerical celibacy in about the ninth century in Western Europe. We'll be going over sexual sin in male monasteries and why sexual purity was so important in the cloister. One thing I really appreciate about the structure of the History Degree is the fact that in our final year the classes we take are a year-long. It really allows us to delve into the subject at more length and really niche down on our interests!

4.30pm – In need of a snack break. My friend and I head over to Teviot, the student union, for some hot chocolate. I also really love the cookies that they sell at all of the student

union venues so I make sure to grab one.



Me and friends all dressed up at our last History Society Ball.

5.00pm – I have a committee meeting with Edinburgh University History Society. I have been a part of the society since my first year and this year I'm the President! Being involved in the society has been a great way to be able to meet people in my course and stay active in the student community. Now out of the lockdown we're able to resume some of our traditional events from pre-COVID! Last semester we held our annual ceilidh and we are currently in the works for planning our International Trip in the Reading Week (going to Krakow!) and our Annual Ball. This has been a really essential part of my student experience and I recommend everyone get involved in some way.

6.00pm – Look at me heading to the gym (a New Years Resolution). I wouldn't necessarily consider myself an avid gym goer but Pleasance gym is great and has so many free

classes for members. You can watch Netflix on the cardio machines and there's a sauna in the locker rooms (I must admit this is my main motivation to go).

7.00pm – I head home and have some leftovers for my dinner before getting ready to go out to drinks with some of my friends. There are so many cool places to explore around Edinburgh and it is such a great city to be in as a student. Tonight, we're headed to the New Town a little bit away from campus. I've genuinely really enjoyed my time here and am so happy with my choice to study here four years ago!