

A day in the life of a postgraduate student

Rachel is a Master's in History student. In this blog, Rachel talks about the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study, a normal day, and the best place for lunch!

When applying to graduate school, there's the burning question that arises: "How is graduate school different from undergraduate school? And, maybe more importantly, what do graduate students do all day?"

I've just started my taught MSc program, studying History, in the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. With my first semester under my belt, I feel qualified to answer both questions. I thought that I would take you with me on a typical day as an MSc student!



This is my winning home coffee combo. I love my University of Edinburgh

coffee cup! I think it is so cute!

8:00am — My day usually begins fairly early. Don't let this fool you, it's not because I'm suddenly more productive having earned my undergraduate degrees. Unfortunately, it's because grad students are not spared the horror of 9am classes. This first hour of my day is usually a blind rush out the door, shoving food in my face. Make sure you eat before class, as some seminar rooms don't allow you to bring in snacks!

Most of my classes this year were housed in the William Robertson wing of the Old Medical School. The William Robertson Wing houses seminar rooms, the history library, the postgrad common room, and many professors' offices. I live close to campus, so I don't have to go far to get to class.

11:00am At this point, I'm sat in class.

I thought I'd mention here that you don't have class every day, or even multiple times a week. Coming from the U.S., often we'd meet several times a week per class. This isn't the case in the UK. Last semester, I took three classes and only met three times a week. One meeting per class per week. That's a lot more free time than I was used to in undergrad.

Class structure varies wildly based on professor and subject matter. However, something that I've noticed is a lot less lecturing. Instead, there's a heavier reading load. You are expected to bring adequate background knowledge, understanding of the material, and questions to class. Don't let that scare you, though! Much of the class is discussion-based, so if you found the material challenging, or even couldn't finish every reading, your classmates and professor are there to help.



A view of the postgrad common room! As you can see there's lots of different places to sit, and a little kitchen where you can make lunch or a hot beverage.

I enjoyed this format much more than that of lecture-heavy undergraduate classes. Not only have I felt much more connected to my professors and classmates, but also to the material. This format also held me accountable for staying on top of my readings. It is immediately obvious to your peers and instructors if you haven't engaged with your readings. I even had a professor tell us to "not show up" if we hadn't prepared. It can be nerve-racking at first, but I found a Socratic style of learning to be much more effective for me!

A view of the postgrad common room! As you can see there's lots of different places to sit, and a little kitchen where you can make lunch or a hot beverage. Most classes are two hours long, which goes by very quickly. By the end of class, I'm usually ravenous. This last semester, I only had ten minutes between one class and the next! Luckily, they were in the same room, so I didn't have to go far.

In between my two class periods, I would run to the café in the Chrystal Macmillan building. The Chrystal MacMillan

building housing the School of Social and Political Science. It's connected to the William Robertson Wing, so it's super easy to get an inter-class caffeine fix. You'll even run into your lecturers there, doing the same thing.

If I'm not heading to my next class, I'll go to the Jim McMillan room, otherwise known as the postgrad common room. It's a super nice space to hang out with your peers and get a little bit of work done. It's cozier and more laid back than any of the libraries. Plus, there are often events in the common room, so sometimes you can snag leftover cakes and coffee!



The Picnic Basket. You can see the line inside!

1:00pm — If I'm just getting out of my second lecture or have been working on some readings, I'll go and get some lunch around this time. There's a lot of great options around campus. There's so many, it's hard to convince myself to bring lunch in.

My favourite spot is just off campus, called the Picnic Basket! They do a great sandwich. It's a popular spot though, so if you get there at the wrong time, the line can go out of

the door.

3:00pm — While it's nice to sit in the Common Room and decompress, it can get a little loud. So, if I'm still in the building in the afternoon, I'll move upstairs to the Postgraduate Research Room. There's no talking in the research room, so whenever I need to really work, this is the place I go.



Lots of individual desks and big windows in the Postgrad Research Room. Also, it's hard to see, but off to the left is a line of desktop computers for student use!

It can feel unreal that I spend five hours a day reading, but some days are like that! Every person has a different working style. I have found it most effective to treat my degree like an office job and work from 9:00am to 5:00pm, that way I don't have to do work outside of those hours. Often, I'll spend all or most of my day in the Research Room, or any of the libraries on campus. I spend a lot of time reading and, as the semester progresses, working on papers. I'll also use this time to meet with professors.

I have found myself meeting with professors much more frequently than I did in undergrad. The material is more challenging, and I have more questions. Mostly, professors are happy to engage with you and help clarify confusing topics. Make sure you're not coming in and asking something that can be googled, though! It's also important to maintain a dialogue with your professors about assignments. You are expected to drive and pursue your own research questions, so ensuring that you're working on something both feasible and within the scope of the class is crucial.

5:00pm — I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. I'll pack up and head home in the evenings, if I've managed to stay on task all day.

The most challenging part of my day-to-day life as a graduate student is how much more freedom there is. It's partly the difference between British and American schooling, but also in how much academic freedom awarded to graduate students. You are solely responsible for your education as a graduate student. If you are not devoting time to readings, working on papers, and engaging with your classmates, it'll be harder to succeed! However, you're given lots of time and space to do that more intense workload. It's tiring and challenging, but I like my graduate schoolwork and day-to-day line-up much better than that of my undergraduate career!


Make sure you save some time and energy for yourself, though. My favourite wind-down activity is pizza and board games with my friends. There's even a board game society at the University of Edinburgh. Don't forget how awesome a city Edinburgh is and leave yourself some space to experience all it has to offer!

How to get stuff done when you have a disability...

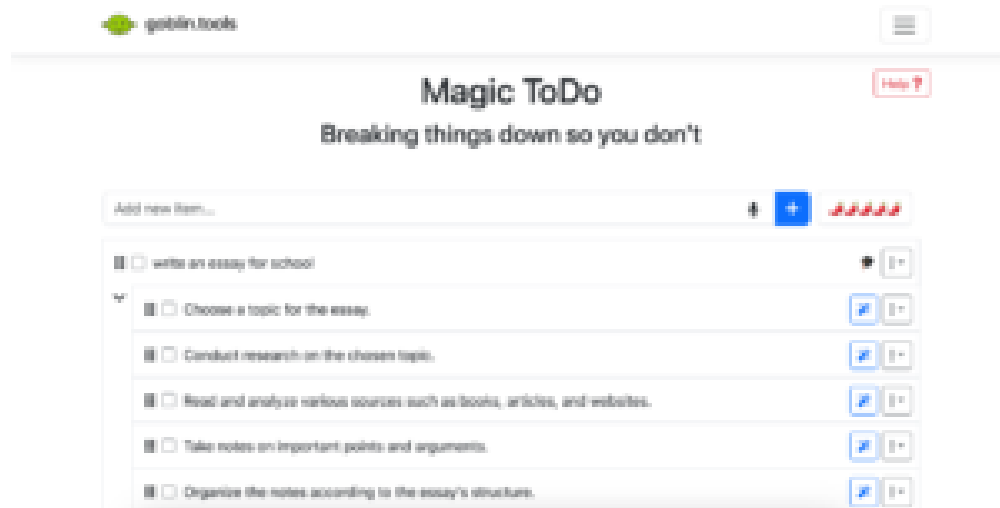
...by Kit / from Belgium / studying History (MA) / 3rd year All Posts

Being at university, there's always a time when we struggle to get work done. As a disabled student, this can be doubly true. Whether that's due to ADHD goblin brain or bad health days, the tips and tricks below can help you stay on track.

Getting a schedule of adjustments

First things first. If you have a disability, get in touch with the Disability and Learning Support Service (DLSS) as soon as possible to talk about how they can support you. This could potentially be assistive software, proofreading services, a study skill tutor, additional time to complete assignments, etc. This is all individually based on your needs and the list above is just a few examples of what help I personally have gotten. 

Break down tasks into smaller tasks

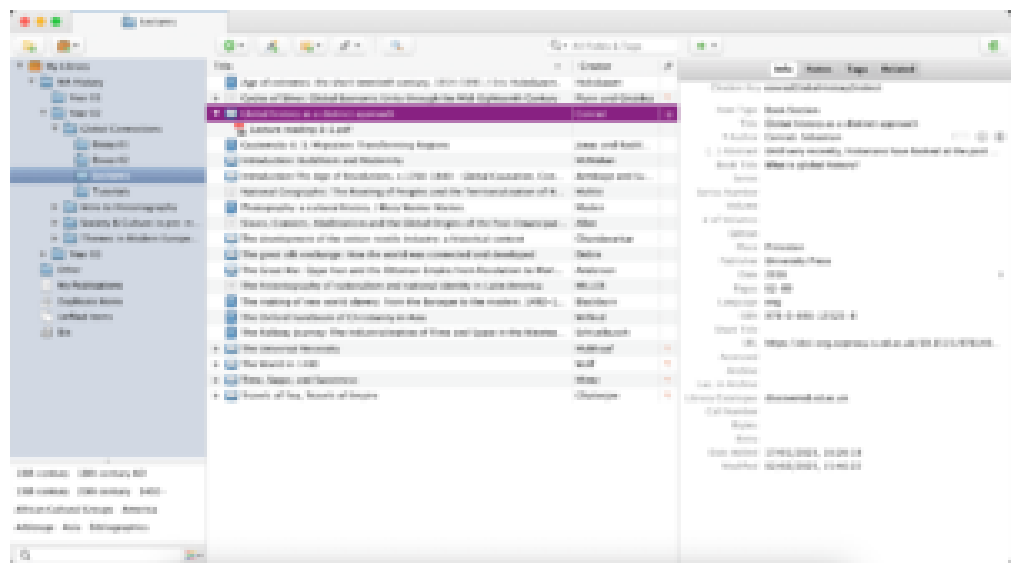


Seeing the list of assignments pile up at the beginning of each semester can be overwhelming. 'Write 2000 word essay' is a very vague

task and it'll be multiplied by however many assignments you have. Where do you even start? My advice? Break. It. Down. And be as precise as is useful for you. For example:

1. chose a topic/question
2. look for sources
3. read the sources (break it down by individual source)
4. take notes on sources
5. ...

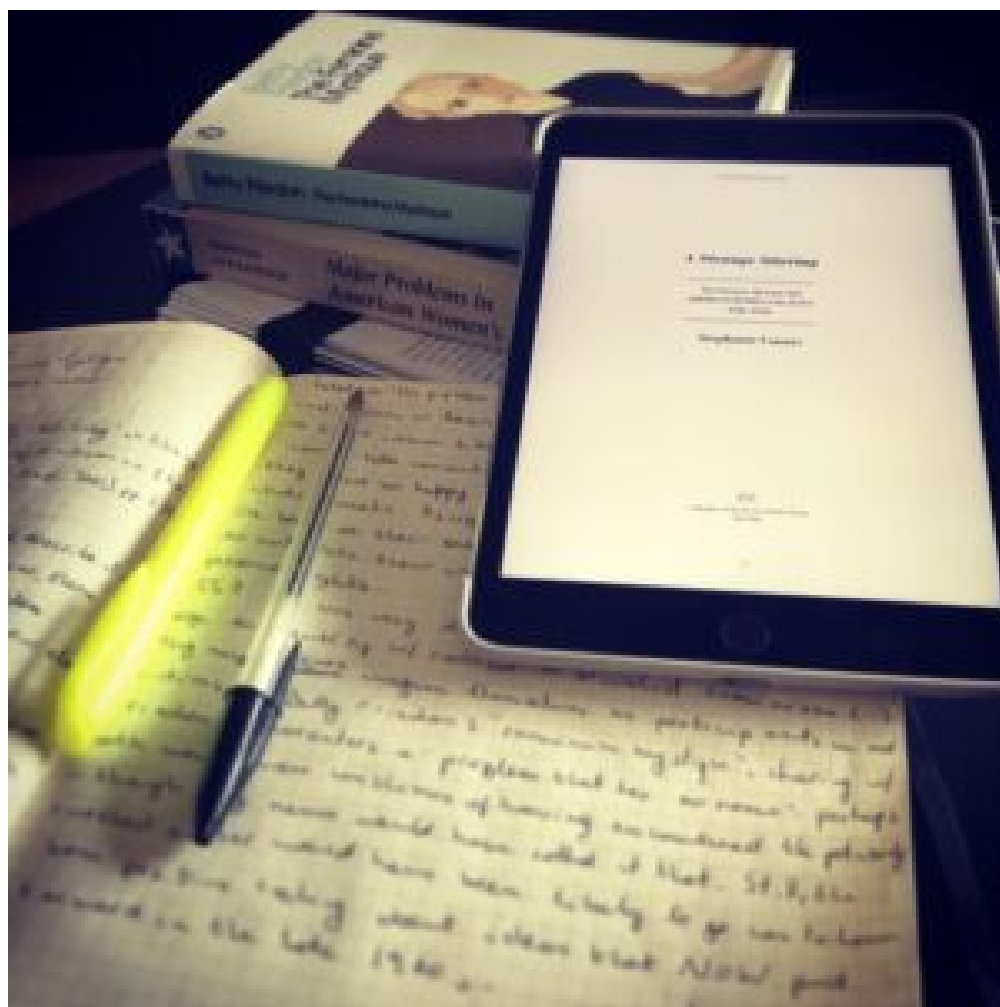
I recently discovered a free online tool that does that for you and you can even choose how in detail it'll break the tasks down and even break down subtasks afterwards. It's called goblin.tools and is an absolute life saver, especially when you're just starting out and are not sure what steps you need to complete your tasks.



Use all the tools at your disposal to make your life easier

When you tend to get easily distracted or only have that much energy to spare in a day or have to account for bad days where you can't do anything, it means you need to use your time wisely and as such any tool that saves you time will be welcome.

At uni, you'll spend the majority of your time reading sources and referencing back to them. A great time saver is Zotero. It's a free research tool that helps you organise your sources. To get the most out of it, combine it with its browser extension and Word plugin. With these, it'll let you automatically add a source to your Zotero database directly for any library catalogue or archive and then cite them back in the proper format in your Word document, saving you a great amount of time on doing this manually. You can also add PDFs of your sources directly into Zotero and use its great annotation function and potentially link it to note taking apps like Obsidian.md or Notion.io to collate your notes when it's time to write that essay.



Read with purpose

Similarly to the above, to use your time wisely you need to read with a specific purpose. You'll be tempted to read all of it and read it in depth. Don't. Generally, for tutorials and

seminars you'll have guided questions. Use those to first skim the readings and find relevant passage to answer those questions, look for key words you think you add to those, and if you already know your essay question look for anything that might stand out as useful. For essay readings or anythings where you'll need to do more reading and/or more in depth start by reading the introduction & conclusion of the book/chapter/article. If it doesn't mention things that are relevant then discard it. If it does, then continue by reading the first and last paragraph and so forth. It's a great way to weed out irrelevant sources and to only read in depth what you'll actually use/find useful, thus saving you a lot of time.

Don't forget self-care and to manage your expectations

Finally, it's really important that you don't forget to look after yourself. It can be tempting to do as much as you can when you can, but if you over do it, it'll just potentially push you back and leave you less time to do the work at a manageable pace. Do your best, within your capabilities and ask for help when you need it. Your Student Adviser and the DLSS are there to help and will point you in the correct direction if they aren't the ones that can help in your particular case.

Want to find out more?

Chat with Kit

What makes HCA so special?

Tanvi shares her experience of being an international student, and the supportive community of School of History, Classics and Archaeology.

Student life in Edinburgh is colourful and multifaceted, and this is something that the University has continued to provide throughout my time as a student here. My experience at the School of History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA) started during Covid so my entire first year was online. I found that as an international student this eased the transition from home to university for me, somewhat. However, at the same time it sometimes made engagement difficult. I found, though, that the University – and especially HCA – strived to remedy this lack of in-person learning. And now, as a third-year student studying full-time in person, I find that the same opinion of student life here holds up.

Academic rigour



The School of History, Classics, and Archaeology provides not only a large variety of degree options, but also an allowance for flexibility and diversity

within those degrees. In addition to a wide range of course options, HCA implements a balanced but academically challenging environment – something that is put in place from

day one.

From my personal experience as a student from the USA, schools don't have an A-level system and the courses offered are general and broad, with no opportunity for Classics or Archaeology backgrounds. I found that even with no prior knowledge of Classical Archaeology and Ancient History – although I was surrounded by peers who had the opportunity to take a Classics A-level – HCA has ensured an all-round and in-depth introduction to the subject. Overall, the class structure, assessment style, and myriad of course opportunities have allowed me to garner the same proficiency in my chosen degree as someone who had prior knowledge of some of the course material. I have found that other international students with a similar background have shared this experience in other degrees.

In addition to literal content, HCA implements an academic system with additional external support from faculty and such tools as the HCA writing centre and peer mentors that result in a higher output of quality of academic work. Three years at HCA have taught me – besides academic content – the professional qualities associated with research, writing, and presentation in regard to my academic work and external projects.

Faculty

The academic opportunities that University of Edinburgh students have are a product of the faculty. The School ensures a broad panel of faculty spanning multiple historical, classical, and archaeological specialties. This not only allows the greater variety of choice for incoming and prospective students in pre-honours, it also allows honours students to choose from a large pool of academics to determine their postgraduate pathways and dissertation topics/guidance. In this way, the HCA faculty pushes students to explore various topics that allow them to experience a very varied

subject area.

Societies



By far some of the most influential engagement among students in HCA comes from the History, Classics and Archaeology societies. As a member of the Archaeology Society, I have found myself not only meeting other students in my course subject, but also other HCA students in HCA through joint society events. By meeting other people in the same subject as me my academic life has improved, which encourages me in my studies. And by gaining access to the wider HCA student network, this has created and sustained an even more warm and welcoming environment in the School.

In addition to the social aspect of the society programs, the academic and professional opportunities awarded to members and attendees is immensely helpful. Through opportunities like conferences and lectures by experts in various fields, the students of HCA have a wonderful chance to widen their academic horizons while also networking amongst academic professionals. And it allows them to browse and gain familiarity with future career opportunities. The Archaeology Fieldwork Fair instituted by the Archaeology Society provides multiple career and fieldwork opportunities annually in addition to other opportunities offered within HCA. The University also has a number of heritage and collections

internship positions for students in the relevant fields, providing valuable experience for the future.

The wider University community

The resources and support available in HCA are supplemented by the environment of the rest of the University, and its faculty and students. The multicultural and diverse surroundings of the University and the wider Edinburgh area is truly something that not only influenced my decision to attend the University, but has deeply affected my current experience here as a student. As an international student, and a person of colour, the University of Edinburgh has created a central community in which students of all backgrounds, interests, and identities can collectively explore the beauty that the city has to offer.

Re-booting student life after two years of pandemic

How a song and dance helped Hanna connect with the University community after studying remotely.

I came to the University of Edinburgh in September 2020 so was in the first cohort to experience what it is like to start my studies under Covid conditions. Unlike many of my peers, I was lucky to have comparatively many in-person classes. Academically, things went well and I felt sufficiently supported – there was just nothing to do except for studying. But when stricter measurements forced me to study entirely online from my home in Germany in spring 2021, I felt very much detached from the student community.



So, going into my second year I was excited for all the opportunities that would come with being in Edinburgh again but jumping back (or rather, for the first time) into student life in Edinburgh was harder than I expected. After all, I had just spent a year and a half either being chained to my desk studying, or to my bed watching Netflix. Although not consciously, I still had the mentality of staying inside and looking for activities that didn't involve too many other people.

I made sure to join as many societies as my schedule allowed, joined the committee of a society and assumed a job as student ambassador at the University to get fully involved, but something was still missing – I still didn't quite feel at home and part of this great student community. That changed when I attended the first showcase organised by one of my societies at the end of last semester. Being at a place where it's mostly students and seeing something solely student-led come to life was truly exhilarating. I finally felt part of something bigger – something I've recognised again at our second showcase and at two theatre performances by other societies.



Sure, going to pubs, bars and flat parties is a great way to meet more people but I have found that they couldn't give me what being part of or seeing student showcases and performances did. I suppose there is a huge accumulation of sheer talent at Edinburgh University, but that's not to say you have to have the talent yourself or be part of such societies – I for one could never participate in a theatre performance or a dance competition. And regarding theatre and such, we are of course fortunate. Edinburgh, as the venue for the Fringe Festival, is the perfect place for student productions. However, I think it's the experience of what can happen when we all pull in the same direction and what we accomplish as a student community apart from the academics that really made me feel 'welcome'.

Now that restrictions are looser again and that people start to feel safe in a room with many others, it's time to revive real student life. Let's do that by going to performances by people you might not know but are connected to through University. Apart from honouring their/our hard work by going to these, nothing feels more inclusive. Plus, it is a great way to enjoy culture without breaking the bank.

It's all Greek (and Turkish) to me! Studying in Edinburgh when English is not your native language

Over 10,000 overseas students matriculated with the University of Edinburgh in the 2021-2022 academic year, but what is like to study here? Georgia-Taygeti – originally from Greece – shares her experience.



My favorite class throughout the first two years of my History degree was not an actual history class. Instead, I looked forward the most to my Turkish class which gathered in the Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies building four times a week. It's not that I didn't enjoy my history classes, or policy and politics courses I took as electives. I did! But there was something really special about our little group of students from across the disciplines and our shared frustration over Turkish grammar. I ended up taking the course for four semesters and the class size ranged from nine to two, for our final semester before honors. I really enjoyed how regularly we met, the close-knit feeling of the group, and the Turkish

treats our professor would bring us. I grew up watching Turkish soap operas, which I highly recommend as a genre of television, so I was really excited to be in a classroom learning Turkish. Mostly, I loved Turkish because in the classroom, all of us were trying to learn a language together. There was no one that was further ahead or further behind. In my history classes, there are always a couple of us that did not grow up speaking English and, still, it can still feel scary to have to participate in discussions with native speakers.

I started learning English when I was in primary school, as a foreign language. Now, I live my entire life in it, which feels insane. I write my academic essays, make friends, and work in it. Learning a second language opened a lot of paths for me, but also was a humbling experience, very much in the same way learning Turkish was. For me, learning a language is about making a lot (a LOT) of mistakes, until you start making sense. It also allows us to challenge our own sense of reality, both personally and as students. For history specifically, the range of sources I have been able to access through the languages I speak is significantly larger than if I only spoke English. If you only read English, it is easy to assume that all academic knowledge is produced in the Anglophone world. It is not. Really good historians produce work in other languages, and learning a new language can help us all access their work, instead of relying on the translation of their thought into English.

By virtue of the many language degrees Edinburgh offers anyone can take a language as a pre-honours elective. If that does not work for you, the Centre for Open Learning also runs ten week courses for many, many languages! One of my favorite recent fiction reads, 'The Idiot' by Elif Batuman, largely revolves around the protagonist and the relationships she develops with her classmates in her Russian language learning class. So if I can't convince you to learn a language at

university, maybe Batuman can!

Centre for Open Learning

Home is where...

To say the Covid years were tough is, of course, a gross understatement. But what if you're a new international student finding your feet in a foreign country? Olivia is a second year History (MA Hons) student, and this is her story.



View of Edinburgh from
Calton Hill at sunset.

I had never been to Scotland before August of 2020 when I moved here for the first time. I honestly don't think I was scared then, but looking back with a year and a half of separation, I don't know how I wasn't terrified. I was definitely anxious about concrete ideas like making new friends, adjusting to learning at a university level, and what if I didn't understand Scottish accents, but as for the physical act of hopping on an airplane and moving to a different country, I wasn't overly concerned about it. It wasn't really until my first week out of isolation that I realised I was in a totally new place living with totally new

people, and I had no idea what I was doing. I still don't really have any idea what I'm doing.

I spent my first couple weeks in the city going to the same grocery stores, the same tutorials, the same coffee shop, the same and the same and the same. My world here – whilst bigger than I ever could have imagined in rural Texas – was still incomprehensibly small compared to the Edinburgh I live in now. And for the most part, I didn't think about home. As the semester went on my flatmates and I started to get more comfortable with each other, and the same and the same and the same started to get less familiar. My flatmates and I would stay up late in the kitchen singing ABBA or trying to figure out ceilidh steps or talking about whatever and whatever else. We'd take day trips, go for long walks to nowhere, explore the wynds and closes of Old Town and get completely lost. And before I knew it, I had finished my first semester of university.

I went home for Christmas, discovered that it was infinitely harder to be the one who leaves than the one who stays, and when I came back, Edinburgh was a different city. The lockdown meant that even the same and the same and the same that I had experienced in the first semester was limited. My flatmates either went home or didn't come back, so I moved to the West End of the city and basically didn't leave my room for the rest of the semester. The concept of making a home here had splintered.



Olivia and her friend, Nikki.

But that semester ended too and I got to go home. I spent most of my summer recovering from living through a global catastrophe functionally alone, so when I came back to Edinburgh this year I didn't know what to expect. I was scared that it was going to be as isolating as it was the previous semester, and I was scared that I would be starting over with friends again. But I didn't have anything to worry about and this past semester has been incredible! The same and the same and the same of my first semester is a distant memory. Edinburgh – which I thought I had a decent grasp on – has gotten so much bigger and I can't possibly imagine that I'll see the whole city before I graduate.

I think that the biggest hurdle to overcome, being both an international student and a pandemic student, is realising that the concept of 'home' takes time. Recently, I went on a trip to St Andrews with one of my very dear friends, and for the first time coming back into the city felt like coming home. After a year and a half, I've made a home and I didn't even know it. My home here is impermanent, but it is beautiful.

A day in the life... Scarlett

Scarlett is a 4th 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 ceildh 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!

Being an international student in Edinburgh

Leaving home to go to University is daunting enough, but what's it like if you're travelling across the world to do it?

Scarlett is from the US so she can tell you.

At times as an international student, it can be difficult to be so far away from home. But trust me when I say it's worth it! Now, as a third-year student I can say I've found a home in Edinburgh.



Members of the History Society in Prague.

When I first started university, I didn't experience too much homesickness. The first few weeks are packed with classes and social activities. I was so busy meeting new people and going to class I barely even noticed how far away I was! My accommodation was really social, and a few of us would go to the Welcome Week stalls and then go to society events in the evenings. When classes started, my tutorial group would grab coffee or drinks afterward. It was also so much fun to learn more about Scottish culture and history. Although I struggled to adjust to the accent, Scots are so welcoming, and I loved exploring the city.

It wasn't until around late November and Thanksgiving was coming up that I started to feel homesick. Most of my friends from home were on break from their own universities and hanging out with each other. It was also my first time missing

out on the holiday and the longest I had spent away from my family. It's not easy to be so far away from home especially since my friends around me could do weekend trips to see their families.

Coming back from the winter break, I felt rejuvenated but still fearful that the feeling would return. Thankfully, by then I had built up a solid group of friends and I started attending more society events, getting closely involved with the History Society. With them, I attended social events like the Annual Winter Ball and Burns Night as well as going on a trip to Prague in the February Reading week. This gave me a group of people to turn to if I was ever missing home, and last year my friends and I put on our own Thanksgiving meal together.

I still get homesick, but it's so much less frequent now and I absolutely love being an international student in Edinburgh. The city offers so much to do from outdoor climbs up Arthur's seat or a fun spooky tour of Mary King's Close to just popping into different restaurants and pubs in the New Town. I'm so happy I made the choice to study abroad!