

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.

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.

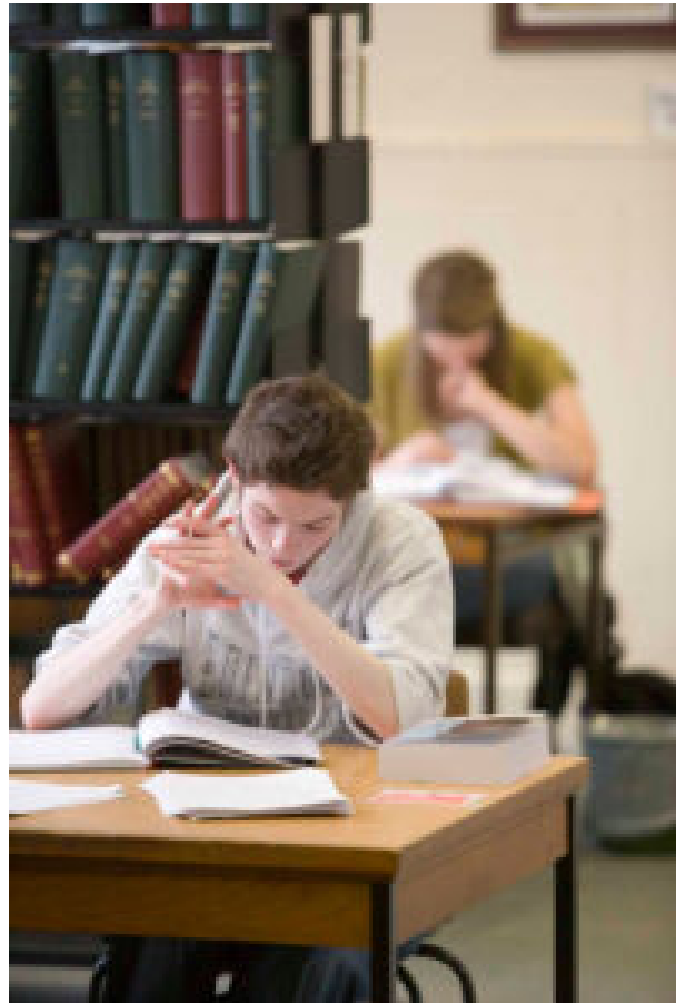
How to prevent burnout as a postgraduate student

Embarking on a postgraduate journey is undoubtedly an exciting and intellectually rewarding endeavour, but it does require a significant amount of time, effort and dedication. How can you get the most out of your studies, without experiencing burnout? MSc Intellectual History student Lena offers her thoughts.

Taking the decision to study at a postgraduate level is a big decision so it's normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed out at times, but in the worst-case scenario – when academia takes over your life a little bit too much, and you cannot seem to catch a breath – it can lead to burnout, adversely affecting your mental and physical wellbeing. To prevent getting to a state like that, I've put together a – hopefully – helpful guide with some simple and practical strategies which have helped me safeguard my mental and physical health throughout my academic journey. You should truly enjoy your time at University, rather than just constantly wishing for all the

deadlines and stress to finally disappear.

Understanding Burnout



Before delving into the advice on how to prevent burnout, it may be helpful to briefly cover what the phrase ‘burnout’ actually refers to. It’s commonly understood as a state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by feelings of cynicism and detachment from work or, in the case of students, from studies. Often, burnout is not the result of a brief stressful period but rather a consequence of prolonged exposure to stressors, overwhelming workloads, and a lack of adequate coping mechanisms. A few common signs that are usually understood to indicate burnout (although these can vary from person to person) include persistent fatigue, decreased productivity, increased irritability, diminished enthusiasm, and withdrawal from social activities.

Managing your Studies

The first area to be tackled when attempting to create a sustainable framework for avoiding burnout during your postgraduate career is probably the most obvious and intuitive – your studies. I'll begin this section with something that we've all probably heard time and time again in a University and work context – time management. There is a reason why people talk about it so much. Ultimately, it is the tool that will help you stay calm in the first place, no matter how massive the workload may seem.

While an undergraduate degree may have allowed you to be more flexible and do assignments at the last minute, a postgraduate degree is often far more time-consuming. Additionally, you are usually expected to engage far more deeply with the topics you are working on. Frequently your lecturers want to see you really delve into a topic for an essay, which is considerably more difficult to do if you only started looking at the question the night before. So, although it may be a tedious task to do, and you might not want to hear it because you have already heard it a thousand times, before you think about anything else sit yourself down and develop a realistic and efficient time schedule that includes your academic work as well as other personal commitments.

A schedule has helped me to prioritise tasks based on their deadlines and importance and to structure my work days based on three main components – readings for upcoming classes, research for assignments, and writing for assignments – and your schedule may look very different, depending on which programme you do and how your classes and assignments are structured. However, the most important thing is that you create a time management system for yourself. Having a system in place means that you do not have to wake up each morning stressed and panicked at the prospect of all the things you need to do.



One crucial aspect to consider when setting up your daily, weekly, or even monthly schedule is to be honest with yourself regarding whether your short- and long-term goals are realistically achievable. It is probably not ideal to simply put down, 'Write your essay on Friday'. Seeing this when you first open your physical or digital planner will very likely leave you overwhelmed with trying to figure out what to exactly do that day. When proactively planning your day or week, it may be much more helpful to break down all your larger tasks into smaller, manageable steps and, most importantly, celebrate your accomplishments, no matter how small they may seem, along the way. Did you write one page today? That is already one page closer than yesterday and one step closer to finishing your essay altogether! Please don't forget to give yourself credit for all the work you do on a daily basis since it is often much more than you think. Being proud of yourself for all the tasks you do, no matter how big or small, will not only make you feel better each day but also help you stay motivated in the long run.

Establishing clear boundaries is another important element when attempting to create an achievable and realistic time schedule. Saying no to things you may not have the time for and would not enjoy enough to warrant compromising other aspects of your academic and personal life is crucial. As much

as it may be tempting to 'do it all,' it is essential to recognise that attempting to juggle too many things at once can lead to exhaustion and will ultimately compromise not only the quality of academic work you put out, but also the quality of time spent with friends and family outside of your University life.

Lastly, I would like to remind you that during your time in Edinburgh, you should not hesitate to utilise the available support systems. You don't have to go through everything alone. Making an effort to connect with academic advisors, the student support team at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology (also known as HCA), and other students can be beneficial for you in many ways. Regular communication with HCA staff and students can provide you with valuable insights and guidance for your academic work, as well as a sense of belonging. It can also help reduce potential feelings of isolation that may be especially strong if you have just recently moved to Edinburgh and have not met many people yet.

Making Self-Care a Priority

As a postgraduate student, it can be quite easy to become completely absorbed in your studies. After all, pursuing a postgraduate degree is expected to push you to your academic limits so that you can potentially join the ranks of those researchers whose work you have always admired. When I first started, I found myself quickly setting aside everything in my life that was not related to my studies so that I could make enough time for reading, researching, and writing. This is only natural, you likely chose to pursue a postgraduate degree because you are incredibly passionate about your field of study, so it is to be expected to want to dedicate all your time and energy to it.

However, if the basics of taking care of yourself physically and mentally start to disappear from your daily routine, your body and your mind will eventually find it increasingly

difficult to deal with the workload and the stress postgraduate degrees can bring. On the other hand, if you get the basics right, you will be able to sit at your desk energised and ready to do your best rather than constantly feeling tired and sluggish.

Simple Steps

Firstly and most obviously, get enough sleep. Sleeping well and enough is essential for your cognitive function (concentration, memory and resilience against



stress) and improves your overall wellbeing. Attempt to establish a consistent sleep routine that works for you personally. If you have never been a morning person, there is no reason (other than a 9am class) for you to force yourself to be up at dawn every day to be productive. If you work better in the evenings, prioritise the evenings as your study time and leave the rest of the day for lighter tasks. The critical thing in this instance is consistency. Find a sleeping routine that works for you and your body and leaves you feeling energised throughout the week.

Eat well and regularly. Cooking may not be the first thing on your agenda, especially during deadline season, but putting a little effort into your nutrition and limiting the takeaways will make you feel much better physically, positively impacting your ability to focus on work. Also, consider

finding a way of moving your body every once in a while, even if it is just a short walk through the Meadows to break up those long library days. If you need an incentive, grab a coffee or a hot chocolate with a friend to get you outside. Even though Edinburgh is not always blessed with the sunniest weather, when the sun does come through, your body will be thanking you for getting some fresh air and a bit of Vitamin D.

Consider trying out some form of mindfulness/relaxation techniques to slow you down during a hectic university day. I will be the first to admit that I have always struggled to understand how people could sit still when the to-do list seemed endless. I was convinced that even sparing 10 minutes for meditation or some light yoga would rob me of valuable time that I could spend being productive. However, over time, I have started to recognise that when you feel overwhelmed with work, it is not always the most helpful to just keep going but rather to stop for a second to breathe and gather yourself again. It ended up helping me immensely to take control over the feelings of panic and stress that often felt not controllable at all. Give a mindfulness activity of your choice a go and see how you feel after. It never hurts to try new things, and it may help you to ground yourself a bit on those days when it all becomes a little bit too overwhelming.

Lastly and most importantly, don't forget to have fun! You are obviously in Edinburgh to study and challenge yourself academically, but don't completely neglect your hobbies and those activities that you know bring you joy and relaxation. Ultimately, engaging in non-academic activities, whether as part of a society or individually, will undoubtedly provide you with a necessary break from the demands of postgraduate life and ultimately help you achieve a better work-life balance. And it can be anything! Maybe try doing something that you loved to do as a child, such as painting and crafting, or try something entirely new to challenge yourself.

Whatever it is, please do not let postgraduate studies keep you from pursuing your hobbies; if anything, it will help your academic performance if you are well-balanced and happy with what you do every day.

There are some of the strategies which have helped me personally with my wellbeing throughout my studies thus far. However, don't forget that if you feel you need help you can reach out to the student support team, who can help you and direct you to appropriate support services if necessary.

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

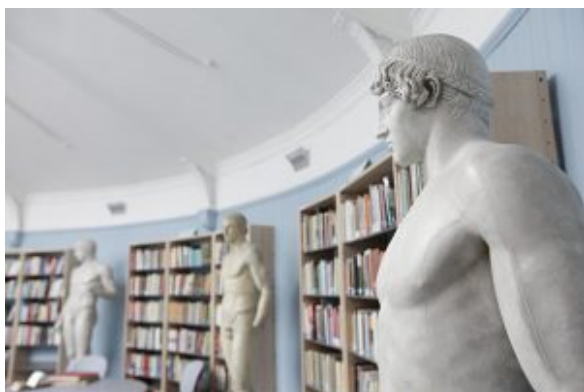
Twice the fun or double the trouble? Student Ambassador Aalish is studying a joint honours degree.

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.