

Find your niche on a 4-year course

The 'Scottish 4-year degree' can seem confusing and a waste of a year, but History and Politics (MA Hons) student Jack argues that it's the ideal way to explore and, finally, focus on what really interests you.

There is no doubt about it, starting university can be a bit daunting – a new lifestyle, new accommodation, new friends, new classes and, for many, a new city.



Not the kind of niche Jack means

Upon starting their courses, something which can often weigh heavy on first years' minds is this notion of "finding your niche". At university, you are often presented with many different course options from the get-go, and there is often a kind of pressure to know exactly what you want to do straight away. In reality, however, it shouldn't feel that way at all. Of course, some people will know that they want to do early medieval Scottish history or modern Islamic studies or whatever their heart is set on. But actually, there is no real

need to have any clue about how you want to 'specialise' so early on in your university career.

One of the real advantages about studying a four-year degree is that there is plenty of time to try out and experiment with different time periods, different regional histories and even different teaching styles and assessment types. In first and second year (especially while your grades don't count towards your final honours degree classification!), take the opportunity to try a course which you always thought about trying out but never quite wanted to risk it.

Moreover, not having studied a certain subject in pre-honours does not necessarily exclude you from picking it up at honours (as long as you meet the necessary pre-requisites, of course). That being said, I think I speak for a lot of my peers when I say that third year (moving into honours) is a solid step up. You definitely feel the gears changing. This is only to be expected, of course, and I found myself well-equipped academically by the teaching staff to deal with this change. The point is, however, that it is a good feeling to be taking courses with which you are completely comfortable. In third year and beyond, it is reassuring to be doing subjects with which you are familiar, and you know you enjoy. So using your pre-honours years as a kind of science laboratory of courses to produce your favourite combination of classes is the way to go.

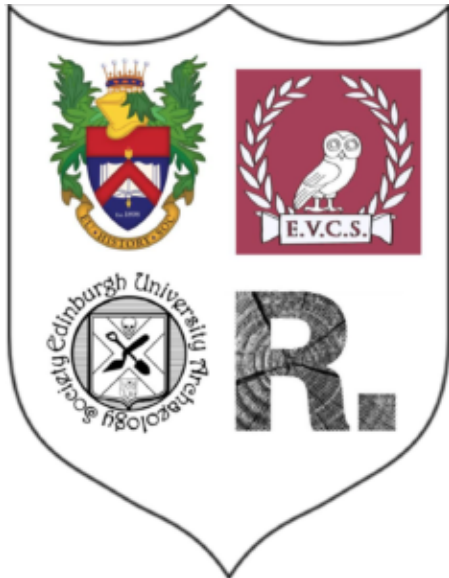
Overall, then, 'finding your niche' doesn't have to be scary. There is plenty of time and opportunity to try things out and even when you get to fourth year, you don't really have to focus on one specific 'niche' one hundred percent of your time. In pre-honours, enjoy the breadth of options and try to combat this expectation that everyone should know their niche within a minute of setting foot through the university doors.

Do the knight thing, or why you should join a Society

Will I find those “friends for life”? Will I be able to balance my studies with a healthy social life? Will there be societies I want to join? Jack – History and Politics (MA Hons) – answers these very questions.

Some of the biggest worries that Freshers tend to have about coming to university are around becoming part of the student community. It can be daunting at Freshers’ Fairs or Open Days (virtual or otherwise) or even just walking around campus. Everyone seems to have their own passions, niches, groups and extra-curricular goals.

I remember thinking how important it was that I “put myself out there”. Yet, in my experience, it’s never as hard as it seems. At Edinburgh, the sheer variety of opportunities means there really is something for everyone. At the end of the day, once you do put yourself out there once or twice, there’s no looking back. For every interest, hobby, sport or passion, you will find an open, enthusiastic community of students ready to welcome any new members. Be it academic, sporty, musical, campaigning, fundraising – finding your niche, your own wee community, doesn’t have to be the scary task it first appears to be



Student Societies within SHCA.

The School of History, Classics and Archaeology has a thriving student community (made up of various societies and student groups) which continues to organise a diverse array of events and activities. For me, I have benefited immensely from being a member of and now officeholder in the History Society. We are a tight-knit student family of history-lovers. We engage in serious academic discussions and respond in historical ways to important current affairs issues, whilst also having fun and organising exciting socials and trips.

In the past, we have had fascinating academic discussions and speaker events, from “A Journey through Ancient Egypt” to the history of Edinburgh’s HIV/AIDS outbreak to disability history to the slave trade in Scotland. We have hosted incredible speakers, from Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, Scotland’s first black professor, to Holocaust survivor, Tomi Komoly. Our programme has also included high-octane ceilidhs and balls at prestigious Edinburgh venues. We have organised trips to our favourite historical sites, as well as city breaks abroad during our (always productive) reading weeks. Our most recent trip was to Prague, where we visited the famous Castle and Cathedral, went on a Communism tour and even dressed up as kings, queens and knights (see the fabulous photo, above). We

also have karaoke nights and walking tours, pub quizzes and movie screenings. And to think we are just one of many, many societies!

Undoubtedly, at the time of writing, things are different. Covid has massively changed the student experience. Involvement in societies is no exception. Yet, groups across the university are adapting. Whether its baking or Persian or netball or Harry Potter appreciation, societies are refusing to let Covid ruin the fun, the discussions and the memory-making. The History Society is still running plenty of events online and has been a platform for first years to get to know fellow history-lovers, as well as meet older students to get advice and guidance.

I personally have met some of my best friends through the History Society. Sharing a love for a subject and having a laugh at the same time is the perfect way to enhance your university experience. Getting involved in societies also affords you the chance to stand for election as a committee member. I cannot recommend this enough: it has been an opportunity for me to get involved in student representation at university and to really connect with faculty members. It also gives you the chance to organise your own society events and represent your society at official occasions. We even got to meet the Chancellor, HRH The Princess Royal, last year!

Moving up to university can be worrying at the best of times and Covid has been a huge challenge. Yet getting involved in our societies and becoming part of our HCA community is a fantastic way to break down those barriers. My advice? Don't hold back! Reap the benefits of an active campus life and explore the diverse range of student groups and societies waiting to welcome you.

Working as a student



Jack hard at work.

All work and no play? Student Ambassador Jack looks at working as a student

At times, it can be a tricky balancing act but I've benefited greatly from getting a glimpse into the world of work; from stepping into a completely different environment to University study, doing something I enjoy whilst gaining different skills from those I might develop at University.

I think I am in an incredibly fortunate position. I'm able to study full-time at a thriving, diverse university, with all the extracurricular and social opportunities that offers, but also work at one of Edinburgh's busiest tourist attractions.

I work at the Royal Yacht Britannia as a Sales Assistant overseeing ticket sales and working in the gift shop. Every week during term I'm able to work just one day and then work practically full-time over summer, so from that point of view

I've been very lucky to have a supportive and flexible employer who has been able to offer me this contract.

It's fantastic to work with the public alongside a highly engaged customer service team, and it's also widened my social group outwith University. I love representing my city – of which I am extraordinarily proud – by working in the tourist industry.

To any student who is thinking about what it is like working and studying, I would say it is certainly testing. There have been weeks when I have found it tough, juggling deadlines and shifts – University is hard enough and any job is a big commitment. But I think it's challenged me to be more prepared and organised, not least when it comes to good time management – a vital skill in any workplace – and I've become a more rounded and experienced individual for it. I would very much encourage you to consider whether a wee job on the side could be beneficial to you – if nothing else, it's some extra cash for us poor students!