

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.

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