

# “What’s so great about living in Edinburgh?”

Good question. Luckily, Tristan [MA (Hons) Ancient and Medieval History] can help answer that.



The fortress on top of Castle Rock includes the 12th c. St Margaret’s Chapel – the oldest building in the city.

In the 18th Century Edinburgh designated itself the ‘Athens of the North’, and wandering through the city centre it’s not hard to see why. Okay, after twenty-something years in the Scottish capital I’m admittedly a little biased. But what isn’t to love about studying a history degree in a city with a beautiful medieval Old Town, gardens set in an old loch and a castle built upon an extinct volcano?

A city that blends its rich history with its position as home of the largest arts festival in the world (yes, the world!) is something quite unique – there’s nothing like wandering down

the Royal Mile during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August. In fact, Edinburgh hosts a huge programme of events throughout the year: from the Book, Jazz and Blues, and Science Festivals, to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. If live arts aren't your thing – although there's plenty to indulge in across the city's many theatre venues – you'll certainly find something to pique your interest.

One of my favourite aspects of the city is its fantastic selection of museums and galleries, the largest of which is the National Museum of Scotland located just minutes from the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. Its collections include the recently opened Ancient Egyptian and East Asian galleries as well as an extensive wing dedicated to Scotland's past. However, because the city itself is so rich with history, just wandering down the Royal Mile is an adventure in itself. Each 'close' – the Scots word for an alleyway – tells a story, of its former occupants or use, the most infamous being the underground Mary King's Close (**definitely** worth a visit!). A former lecturer once told me to always look up at buildings when wandering through the Old Town as you'll be amazed at what you learn from inscriptions and plaques.



Even in the middle of the city centre, there are lots of places for a quieter walk, including along the Water of Leith in picturesque Dean Village.

What I particularly love about the city is the amount of green space. The public Princes Street gardens, situated between the New and Old towns, are always bustling, as are the gorgeous Royal Botanical Gardens. However, you'll find some more secluded spaces if you know where to look, including a hidden gem at the bottom of Dunbar's Close – I'll let you discover that one for yourself! You're also never too far from the countryside and there are lots of scenic walks a short bus or train journey away.

Between its incredible art and literary festivals, heritage sites and beautiful parks – and that's before we discuss everything that the university itself has to offer – Edinburgh is a pretty fantastic city. To be a history student here is something really special, and whilst it might not boast the monumental buildings of the Athenian acropolis, the 'Athens of

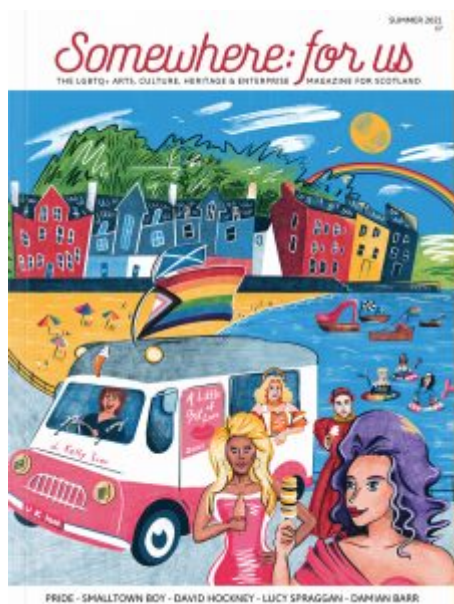
the North' isn't short of wonder.

Find more walks around Edinburgh at the Visit Scotland site.

You can see a map of green spaces within Edinburgh on the Edinburgh Outdoors website.

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## Life as an LGBTQ+ student in Edinburgh



As part of Pride Month, Tristan (Ancient and Medieval History, MA Hons) shares his experience as an LGBTQ+ student at the University of Edinburgh.

Navigating your first year at university can feel both intimidating and exciting as you get to grips with higher education, exploring a new city and meeting new people. This experience can seem even more daunting as an LGBTQ+ student, particularly when tolerance can vary so widely between countries. Fortunately, Scotland has strong governmental policy supporting the rights of LGBTQ+ people and the United Kingdom as a whole has consistently ranked highly on the Rainbow Europe Index. But what does this mean for LGBTQ+ students at Edinburgh, and what is life in this city really

like for those of us who identify as such?

## **LGBTQ+ Life on Campus**

As an openly transgender and queer man, I did have some anxieties about adjusting to student life and whether I would find my place in Edinburgh. Despite being an Edinburgh native, beginning undergraduate studies is a big step for anyone. Thankfully, my time here has



been overwhelming positive and I've had the opportunity to engage in a number of LGBTQ+ centred events. I currently sit on the School of History, Classics and Archaeology's Equality and Diversity Committee and, as part of that, helped organise an LGBTQ+ History Month event in February 2021. Despite being forced online by the COVID-19 pandemic, this meant we were able to invite a speaker from the US to discuss their work with Queer Britain. EUSA, the University of Edinburgh's Student Association, also run events to commemorate this month, so you're sure to find lots to get involved with.

Likewise, there is both a student-led PrideSoc, which you can join, and the Staff Pride Network who hosts events and networking opportunities. LGBTQ+ support is very visible on campus, and I've felt confident being open about my sexuality and gender identity.

## **Finding Support**

As well as the groups on campus, there are various charities and community organisations which can support you as an LGBTQ+ person. LGBT Health and Wellbeing, based in Edinburgh, host a variety of services, including several social groups, so you needn't feel worried about being isolated during your time here. You can also find support through the likes of the Scottish Trans Alliance, LGBT Youth Scotland and Stonewall

Scotland.

In 2020, *Somewhere: For Us*, a magazine celebrating LGBTQ+ people in Scotland, was launched here in Edinburgh which is not only a fantastic resource but highlights the importance of visibility in the city.



## **Bars, Cafes and Eateries**

Edinburgh also boasts several venues either owned by or active allies towards LGBTQ+ folk, including sober spaces such as the Greenwood Cafe, and bars and clubs like Cafe Habana and CC Blooms. There is also a fantastic queer-friendly venue opposite the central campus, Paradise Palms, if you want to grab some food (all of which is vegetarian/vegan) or a drink after your studies. Whether you're looking for somewhere to eat or want to experience the night life, there are lots of options within the city.

Edinburgh as a city is vibrant and beautiful, and LGBTQ+ life here is no exception. If I can offer any advice to you as a prospective student, it's OK to be yourself and don't hesitate to reach out for support.

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# 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.



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# **Essays – everything you ever wanted to know but were afraid to ask**

Student Ambassador Tess (studying Classics and English Literature, MA Hons) takes a deep dive into how to approach writing essays.

I think writing essays and academic papers are probably one of the more daunting tasks you'll have to take on as a university student. I've spent the last three years trying to figure out a formula that works for both aspects of my degree, and honestly, sometimes I still am not sure if I've cracked it. That being said, I do have two tricks of the trade to keep in mind when writing an essay:

## **Break your question down into its essential parts**

Once you write a few essays, you start to realise that all essay questions have a similar structure. There are only so many ways the examiners can ask you 'To what extent' and once you recognise certain buzzwords, it becomes much easier to formulate a plan of attack. Here are some examples:



'To what extent...', 'How far...', 'What...' and 'Evaluate ...' often signify questions that ask you to discuss whether you agree with a certain point of view on a debated topic within the subject. The best way to approach these questions is to

pick a stance and then find opposing arguments that you can dismantle to show a bit more academic sophistication.

In comparison, 'Describe...', 'Illustrate...', 'How...' and 'Explain...' are usually questions that require a more holistic approach to a topic, in which you have to discuss as many facets of the topics as possible in relation to the question (word limit permitting).

Another aspect of the question to look out for are certain key phrases you can use throughout your essay to signal-post to the reader throughout your essay that you are still addressing the question. Constantly linking your essay back to the question in your essay also helps you to stay on topic as a writer.

Here's an example of a question and how you can break it down:

*'What is depicted on the Parthenon Frieze?'*

This question seems relatively simple, but it is one of the most debated topics within Classical Greek archaeology. The use of 'What' indicates that you have to pick an academic stance and justify why you think this is the most likely hypothesis using both primary and secondary sources. You should then pick one or two opposing perspective to evaluate, in order to demonstrate why your chosen interpretation is still the best. Additionally, you should always round a point off with a: 'therefore, as (evidence) demonstrates, (point) is what is depicted on the Parthenon frieze.' That way you are

able to double check as you are editing if your points are properly explained to allow such a statement at the end and your examiner will also be able to pick up quickly if you are doing so because you have used words from the question itself, such as 'depicted.'

## Reference well from the start

Referencing is simultaneously the easiest way to secure and lose marks in an essay. I had so many instances in first year where I lost a significant number of points for poor referencing that had me kicking myself, mainly because it would have potentially pushed me up a grade boundary. The one thing I cannot stand when reading feedback is finding out that I didn't get full marks on a section that is so clearly set out by the subject area. The School uses a variation of the Harvard system and every citation form is listed out in the Essay Guidelines. There is literally *no* reason besides carelessness for someone to not score fully on this section (I promise I speak from experience).



The best way to ensure you follow the guidelines to a tee is to reference properly from the start. Even when I am reading and taking notes on my computer, I will reference quotes and points in the correct format from the beginning. This ensures that when I write my essay and use said quotes from my notes, I can rest assured that the referencing is already done and dusted. Additionally, if you start building your bibliography at the start, it means that you have one less thing to worry about in your editing stage of your essay. It's so much easier to remove any additional sources you ended up not using than scrambling to find a source you forgot to note down during your research stage.

Easy. Right? Don't worry, there's lots of help both in the School and the University with writing essays and other assignments. Look out for Peer Support Groups – SHCA has ArchPals and UoE HCA Peer Support – and Societies running sessions on writing and studying, and the Institute for Academic Development offers workshops and online resources on all aspects of learning.

Institute for Academic Development

SHCA Peer Support

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## **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!

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## **Considering graduate study?**

After four years of study, why would you want to do more? One of our Student Ambassadors, Alfie, has some thoughts.

An undergraduate degree at university is a significant commitment. Time, money, not to mention a lot of concerted effort to complete whilst juggling a variety of other elements of life. So, when considering the option to go into another degree after undergraduate, it's natural to be nervous. The prospect of another year – or even longer – of study with all the accompanying costs and issues attached can be a frightening consideration for anyone. So why do it?

It is, of course, worth noting that academic study is not for everyone. If you've got a real knack for academic work and a passion for a specific research topic or want a job in an industry that requires a specific postgraduate qualification, it may be a good choice for you. Having a suitable research direction in mind will likely be important when looking at programmes and for research programmes such as an MRes or MPhil it will be integral to the application process. For taught courses, such as an MSc or an MA, a focus on skills development and personal qualities will take a precedent. Knowing how to market yourself, be it for your passions or your skills, is a key element to any application.

A graduate degree is a fantastic opportunity and can give you the chance to develop new skills for the workplace, academic or otherwise, but it's worth remembering that it will come with additional responsibilities. The workload for a postgraduate degree is significantly higher than the average year of an undergraduate degree, and there are often more complicated matters regarding funding. Loans and scholarships are available, but the former can be costly in the long term and the latter are never guaranteed when you begin your application. Don't let this dissuade you if you're particularly passionate about a certain topic, just bear in mind that there are more funding processes to apply to, and this kind of research is worth doing at an earlier stage.

The graduate application process itself can be tough. Between rejections, cancelled courses and funding issues, it can feel hard to bounce back. Personally, I found that losing out on my desired graduate course to cancellation was a very hard moment, but I was able to find an alternative that I'm happy with as it allows me to pursue a personal research project. This was all made easier due to my research into graduate schemes starting early in the year, around the summer before classes start. It's around this time that graduate degrees will have requirements updated for the new term, and it's from

here that you can make the best of time off from university to begin your search for graduate study options in honest.

So graduate study is a great opportunity for the right candidate that offers a bridge into professional development or further academic growth, and is a very viable choice following an undergraduate course. Just don't feel like it's either a guarantee or a necessity.

If you are considering postgraduate study the School of History, Classics and Archaeology offers scholarships for Masters and Phd programmes – more information

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## **Approaching the dissertation**

Dissertation. A big word, and often a scary one. Alfie, a Student Ambassador, looks at ways to make it slightly less intimidating.

Perhaps the culmination of your time at university and exceptional (circumstances notwithstanding), also the longest piece of academic writing you will have created to date. Sounds like a lot – and let's not mince words, it is a big task and not one to be taken lightly. However, with the right preparation, forethought, and enthusiasm, it is as enjoyable a project as any other. It should represent the sum of your passions and interests that you have cultivated over your time studying, or perhaps afford you a chance to further explore areas you have not yet had the chance to investigate. Simply put, it is a fantastic opportunity to hit your stride as an aspiring academic, or to cap off your university experience.

When it comes to the dissertation, it is never too early to start planning. I'm not suggesting that you should be coming



out of your first year lectures and taking an abundance of notes on potential topics and sources to use, rather if something grabs you early on, maybe it could be something worth considering for the future. If a particular topic, method, or concept catches your eye, take notes! Remember it for later, and by the time that third year rolls around and the question is being asked, you'll have some ideas for what you've got planned.

It is worth bearing in mind that third year is an optimal time to start your planning, especially over the summer break. At this point in your studies you will have likely covered a great deal of content and – hopefully – will have found something you enjoy writing about. If this is the case, take notes from any courses you have around the subject area and try to explore them. Consolidate reading lists, discuss material with suitable academics, and read around the subject if you have time. Naturally, this isn't something that you need to have done by the first day of fourth year, but it's something worth preparing if you have the time to spare. In addition, try to identify an appropriate member of academic staff to act as your dissertation supervisor – someone who is ideally familiar with the topic, so that you can discuss ideas accordingly.

Writing the dissertation is a separate beast and surprisingly manageable if you like to break things down into sections. A dissertation will often have a literature review that examines contemporary academic thought on a topic and is not too dissimilar from discussions of readings done for seminars. This is often a large portion of your dissertation, so be sure you're comfortable doing the reading to follow through. Other key chapters are your introduction where you'll outline your subject, structure, and points for consideration, and your discussion, where you can make a deep dive into the content, highlighting your own ideas and opinions, as supported by or in opposition to existing thought. Be sure to give ample time

for the writing of all this, as it can seem quite demanding, but rest assured that you'll be able to intersperse this with meetings with your supervisor who can discuss your progress.

When it comes down to it, the dissertation is quite a big process, but one to (hopefully) be enjoyed. The freedom to pursue your own academic interests and supplement your own research with the aid of university professionals is a great opportunity to develop your own researching capability, perseverance, and self-motivation, all desirable and transferable skills for postgraduate study and beyond. While it is a big challenge, it is one that you're not undertaking alone, as all other undergraduates will be in the same boat as you. So don't worry, do your best, and remember to engage with the stuff you're passionate about – it's all plain sailing from there.

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## **Managing your money at university**

One of HCA's Student Ambassadors, Juliet, looks at ways to manage your money as a student.

Going to university might be the first time many people have to manage their money, and the excitement of seeing your first student loan in the bank account is accompanied by the worry of not knowing how to budget it, but there are ways to make managing your money easier.

Firstly, it's important to try to keep track of your spending from the beginning. This might be through money tracking apps or banks like Monzo, which lets you keep tabs on how much you're spending on various necessities and activities, or

Splitwise, which makes splitting bills and expenses with your flat mates easier. Simply keeping a spreadsheet or notebook of expenses that you review regularly can also be helpful to divide your expenses into categories, calculate how much to set aside for necessities, and set monthly limits on non-essential spending.

Setting up a student bank account with a pre-agreed overdraft is also a good idea – do some research about which banks offer the best options for students and for your personal needs. As long as you are not in your overdraft at the time you graduate from university, you can borrow interest-free if you do find your loan running out during your time at university.

Edinburgh is home to some of the highest rent prices in the UK, and it's fair to assume that rent will be your biggest expense at uni. Consider joining a tenants' union like Living Rent to get to know your rights as a tenant and make sure you're not paying extra expenses that you shouldn't be, especially when the time comes to move out.

Statistically, over 30% of students will experience stress related to financial difficulty at some point in their university career – it's not a personal failure and it's nothing to be ashamed of. Managing your money can be extremely stressful, especially in the current climate, and if you are struggling to make ends meet there are several places you can go for advice and support.

If you're looking for employment, The Careers Service, which can offer advice on job-hunting and balancing student life and employment, is a great place to start, and many jobs are advertised on MyCareerHub. Citizens Advice Scotland, which operates online, over the phone or in person across Edinburgh, and The Advice Place, which is university-based and currently open for phone and email service during the pandemic, can both offer student specific advice on a range of issues including budgeting, emergency loans and funding.