



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of History, Classics
and Archaeology

Transcription of Undergraduate Offer Holder Day History Talk

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FABIAN HILFRICH:

My name is Fabian Hilfrich. I am currently the Head of the History Department and in my spare time, of which I have none, due to my current role, I am an active researcher of the history of US Foreign Relations. So I am actually a German who's teaching American history in Scotland, so go figure.

And I'm very happy to address you here today particularly in this historic building, because I can tell you this is McEwan Hall, this is if you do join us in September, in a little bit more than four years from now, this would be the hall that you graduate in. So, you can already take in the sites and you can start dreaming about how that will be when you come up here and you get your degree from our Head of School.

So, what I want to talk about today since you will already be familiar with all our open day literature, and you have probably looked at our website already. So, what I really want to talk about with you today is, what you can expect concretely when you come here in September.

So, the first thing that's going to happen is one week before, in the week before you start studying, before you start taking your classes. You would come here for Welcome Week. Welcome Week's purpose is particularly that, of course, you start making yourself at home but also that from an academic point of view, you choose your courses and you register for your courses. And in order to inform yourself about the contents of those courses about which, obviously, you will know a lot less, you can attend the Academic Fair, that's one of the events that's being held in Welcome Week. And in the Academic Fair, members of staff will tell you what each course contains and they will basically, they will make, you know, they will promote their courses.

A mandatory meeting and a very important meeting that you have in your first week, you will meet your personal tutor. And ideally speaking your personal tutor, who is a member of academic staff, ideally speaking, we try to create this as closely as possible that your personal tutor will be with you for most of your journey as a student. And so, you will get to know them closely. You may actually never take a course with them, but they will be there as your academic advisors, advisors, in all matters academic. And so, you can also discuss with them what classes within or outside of history may be advisable, may be recommended for you to take. So that's a very important meeting that you have and your personal tutor then afterwards is also there for you as your sort of shepherding you through the years, helping you also when sometimes when the going gets rough.

In the first week, you can also start planning, whether you want to participate in extracurricular activities. Our students' association holds a fair... holds an activities fair, that informs you about all the many, many things that you can do across the University. So, you could pick up a sport if you wanted to, or within our own School of History, Classics & Archaeology, we do have a History

Society. And our students also publish once a semester, they publish a magazine called Retrospect. So, you could also get involved with that. So there are many, many possibilities. And you may as well start thinking about what to fill your time with outside of studies during that first week. (COUGHS)

And then hopefully already, that first week will help you feel much more at home. Because we fully realise when you arrive here, you arrive here on your own, it's going to be probably the first time you're on your own, try to take advantage of all the activities that are being offered in Welcome Week in order to make friends, in order to meet other students and in order to make Edinburgh and the University of Edinburgh more like a home away from home.

And then, let's move on to the more serious stuff. So, first week of the academic year after Welcome Week, you start attending your first lectures. And then one week later, you start attending your first tutorials that accompany the lectures.

So, what are lectures for? Lectures on the one hand, of course, are there for imparting some basic knowledge about the course that you're taking. But, in addition to that what you are supposed to learn in lectures is you learn how to excerpt, you learn how to listen, and to write down the things that are most important. Because unless you're a stenographer, you cannot write down everything that the lecturer says. And so, what you learn, the skill that you acquire is to focus on the stuff that's most important.

What do you learn in tutorials? Well, tutorials are basically, that's where you do the real work for the course. Your tutor will guide you, will instruct you, will help you understand the voluminous reading lists that you get on each course, will help you guide towards what kind of reading and preparation you should do. There will be guiding questions for discussions each week. So even though there is a lot for you to choose from, that doesn't necessarily mean with that choice you're being left alone because there will be someone to guide you through that. And in the tutorials you may be asked, for example, to give a presentation and in the present...and in the tutorials also where you start thinking about your essay, start thinking about your essay topic, you ask your tutor questions about how to write that topic. Your tutor will be able to provide feedback on early essay plans that you have, whether those plans look appropriate for putting into operation. So, you're not going to be left alone but what you are learning - and this is true over the course of the four years here - you are increasingly becoming an independent researcher. That, of course, this is sort of that is one of the ultimate skills and one of the transferable skills that you get from a history degree and during the four years we are trying to put help in place for you to realise that.

And then let's move on to the scary part - assessment. The kinds of things that you are expected to do in your courses. it's probably true that in virtually all the courses that we do, essays are an important part because that's where you learn the real work of a historian. How to make an argument, how to weigh different arguments and embed your own within a range of arguments, how you learn to marshal evidence - actual historical facts - that you use to support your argument and how you learn to write and how you learn to reference. So those are really... those are the key skills that you particularly learn in the essays.

There may, in many of your courses by now, there may be non-written skills elements. So, for example, that you learn how to give a presentation and of course we'd expect it to become increasingly confident with giving a presentation. You learn how to participate in a discussion and

what we like to emphasise all the time is that that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to, or that you even should, dominate the discussion, but that a discussion is a give-and-take between all the members of the tutorial in the room. And you may increasingly be asked to...to do some innovative parts of assessment. Like, for example, blog posts. Those might be weekly, those might be bi-weekly blog posts. And again, you know, you can contribute online to discussions or you may be asked, for example, to write a book review which is very particular kind of assignment. So, there are lots of different ways in which you may be asked, and in which you may be assessed, but in which you may also be asked to contribute to the course. And then what I think a lot of students - and I actually heard that in the first session from one of our students who will talk to you later - ... Exams. I know many students hate exams, but we still use them in many of our courses as an important part of the final assessment.

But - and that's the last point I put on this slide - what is equally, at least equally as important as the assessment itself, is that you engage with the feedback we provide. By the feedback I don't only mean the mark that we provide at the end of a module but also we...you will see that we provide almost all our feedback by now we provide online and there is in an online system that we use, there is a special box in which we put comments, written comments and those comments are particularly intended on the one hand to justify the mark we're giving but on the other hand to point out avenues for improvement. We do provide our feedback for a purpose and so right here and now I will encourage you, and we'll encourage you when you arrive here as a student, to engage with that actual feedback we provide so that hopefully you know you can get better over the years of your student life with us.

Brief note on the courses, particularly with emphases on the first year. These are on the screen, these are the three mandatory courses that you have to do: The Historian's Toolkit, which is the sort of methods and skills training course in first year that basically acquaints you with the ways of doing history at the university level because - as you will find out quite quickly - history at the university level can be very different to history at the school level. And then there are two courses that deal with two eras, two epochs in history: The Medieval World and the Early Modern History because we want to inculcate in our students is, from the beginning, a broad coverage.

So later on in later years you... you can - and you probably will - specialise on very specific topics but in the first two years we want you to cover the range of historical... of historical topics and of historical eras and so in the first year we asked you to do The Medieval World and the Early Modern History, a broad approach to large topics in those particular timeframes.

In addition to that you can take, if you want, optional courses in history in the first year. Those are Making of the Modern World, so those are particularly, so that's basically the time period after the French Revolution up until modern day; British Economic and Environmental History - and in a moment, you will have a little taster of a lecture from one of our economic historians' I'll introduce him when the time comes; and because we are in Edinburgh, there is also a course on the history of Edinburgh. And of course, I put that on the bottom again to emphasise the broad coverage that you can achieve in your first two years, you can also take courses that have nothing whatsoever to do with history. So that's entirely up to you. Or you're doing a joint degree then the rules are slightly different anyway because you got to satisfy two subjects at the same time.

Just a brief look at the years two to four. So, there's one mandatory course, the Introduction to Historiography, the ways in which historians think and in which they argue, and then you take two more courses, and in second year, that is more rather than focusing on eras, they focus on regions in the world, different regions in the world. So, you can already see how the course topics become slightly more specialised. And that is particularly the case as well in the third year, again, you have mandatory courses Historical Skills and Methods 1 and 2. In the first one, you will learn to apply what you've learned in Introduction to Historiography and you write an historiographical essay. And in the second one, you learn how to deal with primary sources. So, both of those are, of course constituted for what it means to be a historian. And then you take four additional courses.

So, by third year, you focus on your degree choice entirely. So, you take only history courses, and these will then already be much more specialised. So, you know, whereas I mean, just to give you an example, from what I do myself, in the second year, I teach on Modern United States History, and then in third year, I offer a course on transatlantic relations during the Cold War. So, much more specialised, much more focused. Or your alternative in third year, you will probably have heard about that, and we can talk about it in the Q and A, is that you go abroad for third year, and that you don't study in Edinburgh, but that you study somewhere else in the world.

In your fourth year, you will probably have your most intensive study experience, because you take two so-called special subject courses, they last over the entire year, they take no more than 15 students a piece. And you will do under the guidance of a member of staff, you will do a dissertation focused on primary sources and also over the course of the year. So that will be your most important independent research project of your student career.

And with that I'd like to invite our three student ambassadors to share their experience of what it is and was like to study at Edinburgh.

RUBY:

Hello, my name is Ruby. I'm in my third year of just history, nothing else. I'm in my third year, so that means I've got one year left. I mainly do history to do with sex and gender and bodies. So, I'm intrigued but frightened by statistics. There's lots of things you could ask me questions on. As Fabian was saying earlier, exams, I hate them, I can tell you about doing university even when you hate exams. I can tell you about working, working with the University's collections and archives (I do a bit of volunteering). But I think mostly, probably most qualified to talk about the History Society. So, the History Society is one of four societies that are based within the School, we have History, Classics, Archaeology, and Retrospect, which you are going to hear a bit more about here, a bit more from someone far more qualified. But I've been in the History Society since my first year, and then in my second year, I was the social secretary, which means I organised all of the social events. And then until tonight when we have our annual general meeting, I've been the president this year.

So, one of the things I really like about studying in Edinburgh and particularly studying in School of History, Classics and Archaeology, is that these societies do create a sense of a student community. And like a student community, that's not just the University, but it's also like, smaller within your school. So, something I found that with, with history, with the lecture and tutorial system, it's not like my friends that are doing sciences. You don't have much time to chat because you're being, you're having to chat out the work or you being chatted at about the work. So, I found, whilst I was

meeting a lot of history students, I wasn't getting much chance to socialise with other history students. And it had gotten to October and I realised...I don't know any other historians, so, best join the History Society. Yeah, I, I signed up, I bought tickets to an event and we got asked to fill out forms and say who you wanted to sit with and I just wrote on this form, I don't know anyone, can you sit me with any other first years please? And I met my best mates who are still my best mates now. And I liked it so much that I volunteered for the History Society for two years.

Yeah, the History Society is an academic and social society. So, we put on, we've got extra academic events, like outside of the curriculum, so we invite guest speakers, or we do panel discussions about how you can apply history to more topical issues. But we also have socials, we have formal stuff like Ceilidh - that's a Scottish country dancing, I didn't know what it was until I came here. We have a winter ball, which is at the Balmoral hotel, which is lovely. But we also do pub quizzes, we do film screenings, do all sorts and we're open to everyone and it's a really good way of meeting other historians and making some mates in first year.

KATIE:

Hi, my name is Katie, I'm a final year student in history and politics. It's a joint honours degree and, and hopefully, in a few months, I'll graduate in this building and everything will be fine, we'll see. So, I didn't start in the School of History, I started in the School of Politics. And I did an outside course, which you were being spoken to about earlier in history, and got some of the historical skills, really enjoyed it and went to my personal tutor, who very kindly arranged for me to switch into a history programme. So that's how I have ended up here. And I've had a wonderful time in the department, and in my second year, my personal tutor helped me again, but this time to go on a year abroad. So last year, I spent the year studying in Ottawa, which is the capital of Canada, at a university there, which is really exciting, gives you a much broader academic perspective, because you get North American ideas of things too. But most importantly, it was probably just a very important life experience to live far away. And that was great as well. So if you have any questions about doing the joint honours degree, or about doing a year abroad from Edinburgh, please let me know.

ELLIE:

Hello, my name is Ellie, I'm also a fourth year and I do just straight history, have done since the beginning. And then I went on a year abroad as well in my third year but I went to Europe, so I went to Oslo in Norway. I think my experience of studying history, I came to university thinking I really enjoyed a very specific area of history and then it sort of completely changed my views of what I like studying and I've really focused it across the four years. I started off to doing a lot more social history. And then I've sort of honed in on more political history, especially in the last, from the 20th century, and in my last year, and then for my dissertation I've honed it in even more, and I'm studying resistant and collaborationist women in France in the Second World War, doing more like memory studies. So, I think Edinburgh was really great 'cause you got a really good taste of lots of different types of history. And you can come with one idea of what you'd like and then by the end of it come out with something completely different. And then with my year abroad in my third year, I think it's a really amazing opportunity. Edinburgh is incredible, and I had three really great years here, but it's really exciting to get a different perspective from a different university, meet new people, and then bring those skills back into your fourth year.

In terms of extracurriculars, I have also been involved with History Society, just as a student going along, not on committee, and then also have been involved with Retrospect, which is the History, Classics and Archaeology journal, publishes lots of different articles both online and in print every term, so they do a print edition every term and it's... yeah, it's such a great society. I was a digital editor, so I did the more online design side of stuff which was a nice sort of addition, wasn't just writing, as I was in my history degree, I had a more creative side of it, but if you want to write, if you want to edit, it's a really good place to get involved and sort of see the whole process of what it is to create a magazine on a semester basis and yeah it's a really good way to stay involved with the School and meet teachers in a different way through the School, but also you are involved in the society as well, so it is like a new group of people.