

A LITTLE (?) LEARNING

What makes a man a few weeks short of his 78th birthday decide to undertake the long-term task of studying for a degree and commit himself to devoting to it the very considerable time involved? No doubt, different people would have different answers, but in my case it was the challenge that appealed, together with the long-term view and the immense satisfaction I know I will feel if, after a few years of work, I will be more broadly educated than previously and able to call myself a graduate – and if teachers don't value education for its own sake, who does?

The idea of studying for an Open University degree had occurred to me from time to time over many years, especially since I had retired from teaching, and more especially since the death of my wife in January 2001. Many years ago, a friend of mine had obtained an OU degree while still working, and more recently I became friendly with another man who had done so, and it was this that brought the idea to the forefront of my mind again, although I did nothing about it until one day in the summer of 2017, when an advertisement for the OU appeared on television. That was the beginning of the long and satisfying journey that I am now on.

'Alan,' I said to myself, 'instead of thinking about it, go online and find out what the possibilities are'.

Because of my lifelong interest in the arts, especially classical music, finding information about courses in that sort of area was a priority, but I also needed to know such details as how long it might take to graduate; how many hours of work per week would be needed; how the teaching structure worked and, not least, the cost involved.

The OU has an excellent website, very easy to navigate, and quite soon I had all the information I required. I would be able to work towards a BA (Hons) Arts and Humanities (Music) degree by studying modules worth a total of 120 credits at each of three stages, with an astonishing sixteen years in which to do so. Obviously, at my age, that sort of timescale was out of the question and I hoped to take no more than three years, which I thought might be possible considering that I am a widower and live alone. I also found that at Stage One I had to study a compulsory module called The Arts Past and Present, which sounded interesting, and because my main

subject at teacher training college had been mathematics, I was delighted to find that I could complete my first 120 credits by working through two modules in that area from a long list of options. As far as study time was concerned, the recommendation was about 36 hours per week, which I believed I could achieve with some careful planning. My work would be assessed through a series of assignments which would be marked by my respective tutors, except for a few online maths ones which were marked by computer. At the end of the year, there would be externally-marked tasks except in the case of the more challenging maths module, which would involve a three-hour exam. Because I intended to do so much in one year, the cost would be £5,728, which I was prepared to pay despite it being a considerable sum. I had made up my mind to go ahead.

It was a Saturday afternoon when I picked up the phone and rang the OU to enrol as an undergraduate student, feeling rather proud that I could think of myself in those terms, and I was very fortunate that the young man who answered my call could not have been more helpful. He duly enrolled me for my chosen modules and confirmed the amount of my fees, whereupon I asked the crucial question: 'How do I pay?'

He outlined the various ways in which I could do so, all of which I have forgotten except the one I chose: - 'If you have cards you could pay now, if that's convenient. 'Alright,' I said, 'I'll do that,' and I duly split the fees between my debit and credit cards. If I had then thanked him, said goodbye and rung off I would be considerably poorer.

I was completely taken aback by what he said next: - 'You know, Mr Gallagher, I think you should consider applying for a student loan.' I was so surprised that I was almost speechless. 'A student loan? I'll be 78 years old in a few weeks. How could I get a student loan?'

'You're studying for a first degree, so I can't see why you couldn't get one. You would need to speak to Student Finance England. There'll be someone there now. Would you like me to give you their number?'

There was only one possible answer to that question, so within minutes I was talking to another very helpful young man with a warm Southern Irish accent who explained the student loan system, about which I knew very little. I was surprised that no

repayments are due until the April following graduation, by which time I would be at least 81. Furthermore, the amount to be repaid depends not on how much you owe, but on your income. At that time graduates were required to repay, annually, 9 per cent of their gross income over £21,000, but this has since been increased to £25,725. Thus, many older people and those on low incomes will be obliged to pay either very little or in many cases nothing, and any outstanding debt is cancelled 30 years after repayments start.

It was very clear to me that with total fees of almost £18,000 across my whole course I was going to die with a very large debt still outstanding, so I asked the next obvious question: 'There's no possibility that I'll have repaid my loan before I die, so presumably the outstanding debt will come out of my estate?'

The reply was another astonishing surprise: 'Oh, no. When you die, the loan will die with you.'

That was very good news indeed, so I took the young man's advice and applied online when that conversation had ended. A short time later, I received confirmation by letter that my loan had been granted, whereupon a couple of phone calls ensured that my two cards would be credited with the amounts previously taken. From my point of view, there is no financial transaction involved – Student Finance England simply pays my fees to the OU while I get on with studying.

I now looked forward to receiving my study materials, and three heavy parcels duly arrived: eight maths textbooks, four on *The Arts Past and Present*; two of mainly coloured plates, many of which were reproductions of paintings; several DVDs and CDs; assessment handbooks and an assortment of other items. The books were of very high quality, heavy and printed on silk-smooth paper, making them pleasing to handle; these were exciting times, especially when the three module websites appeared on my laptop, each week's work clearly laid out and my three tutors' details provided together with information about online and live tutorials for each module. Soon my tutors sent emails introducing themselves and welcoming me, to which I replied with a little information about myself.

Having drawn up what I hoped was a realistic daily schedule of study time allowing for the recommended number of hours, I got down to work in early October 2017 and I was soon glad that I had taken on two very different subjects, because each day's work, split between mathematics and arts, provided a refreshing, self-motivating variety. When problems arose the relevant tutor was only a phone call or an email away, and their responses were invariably prompt and helpful.

Another crucial aspect of OU courses is the system of tutorials, some live and some online, and I signed up for all of the former that were available, being fortunate that they took place in Newcastle city centre, a mere four miles or so from my home, some on weekday evenings and others on Saturday mornings; they provided an invaluable way to meet not only tutors but other students, and I quickly came to admire those who study at this level while holding down a job; that would have been impossible for me. My tutor for the more demanding maths module did only online tutorials, which did not appeal to me, so I attended live ones with another tutor; these were especially useful, as I was often the only student who turned up, affording the opportunity to benefit from individual tuition on topics of my choice, rather than the ones officially scheduled. In all, I attended sixteen tutorials across my two maths modules and six, plus two-day schools, for arts.

Apart from the teaching system, it is the assessment process that is the heart of OU study, and the schedule for submission of assignments is set out at the beginning of the course; completing and submitting them by the prescribed deadlines is crucially important, and except in special circumstances this is done online. They are then returned duly marked, usually within about ten days, accompanied by comments and detailed advice from the relevant tutor. I suppose I must be a pessimist, because every time I receive an email telling me that an assignment has been marked and is ready to collect, I tend to think that this will be the one for which I will have got a terrible mark. Fortunately, although my marks have not always matched my hopes, no disasters have befallen me yet, and of course there is another side to this. When a mark higher than expected is given, it provides a huge boost to morale, because even modest success is a great motivator.

By early June 2018, my first year was over, the last event being my maths exam, which I sat in a very large room at Northumbria University, among probably a hundred or so candidates taking a variety of subjects. I came away fairly confident that I had not let myself down, and I was sure that I had done well in the other maths module, for which I had hardly needed to do any work, bearing in mind where I was before the course started. The arts module had been very wide-ranging, covering among many others such topics as Cleopatra, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the painter Cézanne, philosophy, poetry and, most interesting for me as a music lover, the composer Shostakovich, especially his string quartets, none of which I had previously heard. What a discovery they were!

There now followed about six weeks of awaiting results, and when they arrived, I was disappointed by my arts mark, which was well below the level of my tutor-marked assignments, but this was compensated for by my maths exam result, which exceeded my expectations. Overall, I had comfortably passed Stage One and I could now relax for the remainder of the summer and turn my thoughts to what to study at Stage Two and to the important business of applying for a further loan, which was duly granted: £5,856 to add to the previous £5,728.

I now had to set out on the music route, and of the two modules on offer I chose Inside Music, even though the final, externally marked assignment was to involve setting a poem to music with piano accompaniment, which seemed very daunting. I remember thinking that if the OU could teach me to do that, it really would be something, and I can report that they have had a very good shot at it, so I am hopeful that my effort, due by the 6th June, will not be a disaster. The rest of that module has been very much to my liking, being almost exclusively related to what we commonly call classical music, and to complete the required 120 credits for this stage I opted for Creative Writing, a module which teaches three genres: fiction, poetry and life writing. Having done no writing that could be called creative, apart from my own brand of poetry, since my teacher training college days I have found this quite challenging, but it has gone reasonably well and been very enjoyable, so I have high hopes that when results are published in July, I will have qualified to progress to Stage Three.

My advice to anyone thinking about studying with the OU is simple: have a look at the website and, like me, you may find yourself hooked.

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