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“How does the experience of your course compare with any expectations you may have had?”

Middle of the night, darkness all around a single light with a tired student, an open book beckoning for attention that is very unlikely to be forthcoming. Loneliness, Isolation and an uphill struggle were the expectations I had for my course. Even so I was determined to reach the summit and proudly declare I had succeeded! The success would be even sweeter for the struggle!

Enrolling at the Open University was a life changing decision. I had come to a point in life where I could do what I wanted to do. I left school at sixteen but had always aspired to a University Education. Now my family are grown I can follow my dream. I had not studied for many years and felt time had moved on and my skills were outdated. A look at my children's schoolwork had convinced me that I was 'old fashioned' and out of touch but also spurred me into an enthusiasm to learn. Their science lessons were far more engaging than any I had encountered as a child!

In reality, my experience has been the opposite of my expectations. Loneliness and isolation is not my experience, instead I am part of a very large community. There is a very supportive network, including tutors and other students. The main way communicating is via the 'First Class' conferencing system. It is on here that you can ask questions, get help and support at any time. It really feels like a network of friends who when you have a problem you ring and talk it over! I also am allocated a personal tutor who I can contact at any time either by phone, email or letter and often do. Every tutor I have had has been very supportive and encouraging.

Books in the middle of the night are also not my experience, I am able to study at reasonable hours and as and when it fits into my life, though I must adhere to the cut off dates for the assignments. The subject is so well presented and enticing that it is not a bind to spend time studying. The course is also supported with interactive CD ROMs that enhance the experience. Sometimes there will be a TV programme to watch or even an audiocassette to listen to. There are also tutorials to go to. There is also a vast amount of help with study skills, videos, toolkits etc. I am able to get support in organising my learning experience as well as the subject I have chosen to study.

Another part of the overall experience is the 'Summer School'. One week each summer you go on a residential. Here you study for seven days from early morning until late at night and it is the most wonderful experience! The community spirit and support from tutors and students alike removed any of my expectations of isolation. The pace is very intense and you have achieved so much at the end of it! It is at Summer School that I have experienced my most innovative teaching ever. One tutor teaching us about ionic compounds got two students to the front, wrapped them up in bubble wrap and got several other students and 'mixed' them up by turning them around and bumping them into one another. Not only was it a welcome break from the intense schedule it actually remained in your memory for evermore! Another method he used to get us to understand energy levels in a cell was to put a stepladder on the workbench and get a student to climb to the top and gradually come down the steps as each level was reached.

My expectation that I was 'old fashioned' and 'outdated' also was not the case. I am not the oldest person studying and study skills are not outdated, maybe a little rusty but certainly can be used again and improved upon. My experience is that I am able to engage in the course and get reasonable marks. The knowledge that I was taught as a child, is not 'outdated' but may have been further experimented upon and explained a little more but there is always more to find out in Science. My course is not 'something to learn' but it is a switch that activates my curiosity and motivation to go further into the subject. It is the signpost directing me on the journey not the destination.

Assessment takes several forms, TMAs (Tutor Marked Assessments), ECAs (End of Course Assessments), Exams, CMAs (Computer Marked Assessments). The most frequently encountered being the TMA. My

expectation of these was that I would not do very well and there would be comments about how badly I had done. At first I was frightened to open the envelope when it was returned. In reality the opposite again is true, my marks have not been dreadful and the feedback from the tutors have been extremely helpful and encouraging, pointing out where I went wrong and constructively suggesting how to improve.

I find the combination of learning materials enhances my understanding of the subject. Not just having to read books and make notes but having television programmes and audiocassettes to support the books makes it more interesting. The interactive CD ROMs help also, I am able to change conditions in an experiment and view the results and also take part in a larger group experiment. My learning experience is far more positive than I originally expected it to be, so much so that I can't wait for each new course to start.

Loneliness, isolation, dark evenings, heavy books and the glistening of a golden halo above my head lighting the room – my picture of an Open University degree was far from the experience I am now encountering. This bleak picture has been replaced with one of a summer's day, a colourful book, and a happy group of friends who share my thirst for knowledge. Success doesn't have to be a bitter pill after all!