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

I'm seventy-seven years old. Been kicking around the world on a sailing boat for the last eleven years, now I'm retired again and trying to make up for all the lost educational time by taking a Biosciences degree at Canterbury Christchurch University, and in the process suffering a culture shock, finding that nothing changes. The kids of today have all the guts and drive that the kids of my generation had, plus a few advantages that we never dreamed of.

I was born in nineteen twenty-eight, a child of that uncertain time between the wars, when politicians who didn't really know what they were doing, tried to make deals with dictators, and guided the country down a slippery slope to disaster (so what else is new?).

My expectations of the course? Well, our expectations are born of our dreams. As George Bernard Shaw said in 'Back to Methuselah',

'You see things and you say 'why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'why not?'

But my dreams, and therefore my expectations are also different

When my wife and I were sailing, the 'live aboards' that we met along the way had a tremendous influence on the way that I thought. They were the extremes of personality; a few, not all of them by any means, had been successful in life, but meeting many of them broadened my intellectual horizons. For the first time in my life I was associating with people who had made things happen, who had worked and been successful in many different fields.

When we retired (again) in 2001, the sailing was finished, but something had to take its place. Somehow, in the years before retirement I had developed an interest in stem cell research and gene therapy. I soon realised my woeful lack of understanding and it was obvious that this was the time get an education, hence Biosciences at Christchurch.

Having left school at fifteen my expectations of the course were largely shaped by conversations with friends who had an education. My formal education, which by any standards was sparse, consisted mainly of an AS level evening course in human biology which I took in 2001 after I retired.

I expected a great deal of hard work (got that one right), moments when trying to absorb more knowledge was like trying to cram a quart into a pint pot (that one too). What I didn't expect were the lengths to which the lecturers would go in order to help a student who was struggling mightily and achieving little, nor in the third year did I expect to find the help and encouragement that I received from the technical assistants, who would go to a great deal of trouble to find obscure reagents that I didn't realise I needed until the last moment.

The first year involved a weekend field trip to a farm where various studies and exercises were undertaken as a group. I found this a valuable team building exercise, it served to break down the generation gap, of which I probably was more aware than the rest of the group, and served as a basis for the closer working relationship that emerged in the third year.

The field trip in the second year blasted the cobwebs away (not that many had had a chance to form), but it did underline the length that the lecturers would go to in order to help someone who was struggling hard and achieving little.

I was awarded an F for one exercise, heartily disagreed with this assessment and queried it. My tutor showed me that I had been making a basic error in a statistical formulae which I thought that I had absorbed correctly, and he went to a great deal of trouble, including waiting for me outside a lecture, grabbing my arm, and explaining the point yet again. This time successfully and the method of chi square analysis is now permanently lodged in my brain.

The way it works is, many people can teach, but only the student can learn. Some are lucky, and learning comes without effort. Unfortunately I'm not one of them and the learning experience requires a great deal of effort. This implies motivation, which comes from within, and inspiration, which must be supplied by the lecturer. I've always been motivated more by practical work, and would like to see more practicals in the course. Probably this is the perennial cry of the student; 'more practicals, and damn the time and the expense' whereas the cry of the college is 'more students, and damn the practicals'. In the end the timetable will find its own level and the best compromise for all will be achieved.

I have often wondered what the other students thought the first time that that this senior citizen appeared amongst them. Most of them are younger than my grandchildren and the generation gap appeared fairly quickly. Now in the third year a great deal has changed, a few have dropped out but the ones that are left seem to have matured and there is an easy comradeship in the group. I have known similar relationships in the army and in the crews of ocean going yachts but it is gratifying to see them in such a disparate group, even more gratifying to be a member of such a group.

Most of our lecturers are good; but what makes a 'good' lecturer?

I can recall one who was 'bad', so bad that anyone who wanted to learn had to work extra hard at home. I can remember almost every agonising moment that I spent in his lectures, but more to the point, every subject that I slaved away with at home. Perhaps the truth is that the student has to be driven. Driven by a feeling that learning is the most important thing in the world. If that's the case, then there are no bad lecturers, only good ones that interest and better ones that inspire.