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

Aarghh!! What was I doing? I was 42 years old and had a perfectly good career in the Health Service (with a salary!) and yet I was sitting in a laboratory surrounded by my fellow students, most being younger than my daughter, staring at portions of seaweed (unfortunately not crispy fried). What did I think I'd be doing? Well, I didn't really know, I just wanted a route to become a professional (paid!) whale-watcher, so signed up for marine biology and thought everything else would just fall into place.

I've done some scary things in my life...abseiling, snorkelling with killer whales, riding the "Spin Doctor" at Blackpool Pleasure Beach...but walking into a classroom again after 21 years took the biscuit, I was terrified. Of course, as I have seen many times in my life before, the reality of the event was nowhere near as frightening as the anticipation, and helped by a "buddy" that I had met at the "Mature Student Induction Day", the first lectures and practicals flew by, and I soon settled in to being a student.

I thought my lack of recent study would really hold me up, particularly chemistry, as we had to pass this module to proceed to our second year. Prior to the lectures I went around the house trying to put a chemical name to all my household items; salt, baking soda, bleach...even the dog thought I'd lost the plot! Then I found another best buddy called Mr Google, what a smart fella! Taken with a pinch of sodium chloride, the information gleaned from the internet has been invaluable; just this morning I have found a step-by-step pictorial account of fish dissection prior to my real-time assessed session on Thursday, wonderful.

As I progressed into my course, one of the biggest challenges I faced was accessing the course information from home, thus reducing the number of seven hour round trips to university. I hadn't expected this to be so hard, as I thought I was quite computer literate, but have found that one system just doesn't speak to another and get regularly frustrated, especially before the speed of a broadband connection. The only down side to broadband is not having so many twenty minute slots to go and make cups of tea while the lecture slides download! How I love the lecturers who put their notes onto the electronic "Blackboard" before the session so that I can be better prepared. It also assists my complicated mathematical analysis exercise which deduces the relative weight of the bag in relation to number of textbooks required, divided by the number of times I change trains!!

The lecturers have been great. I didn't realise they would be so young, but have seen from them that age is a state of mind rather than anything else. It is application, motivation and good old-fashioned hard work that make the difference, and they lead by example. When they get time to do their own research or take holidays, is a mystery to me, and my previous thoughts of the "easy life" of university lecturers were dispelled very early on in my course. It has made such a difference to know that when I get to that point in my statistics analysis when all the figures are going around in circles and whichever button I press says "data error" that I will be able to get help promptly, due to a very generous "pop-in unless the door says busy" policy. I'd thought it would be more like the doctor's surgery where I'd wait two weeks for an appointment, only to find the spots had gone away by then!

If I'd expected our first field trip to a remote Scottish Isle to be a merry jaunt I was somewhat disillusioned! Managing to finish writing up the day's activities in time to get into town (it was a 1 mile walk) for a beer before closing was as challenging as the exam at the end, but neither proved as difficult as being brave enough to sing my first (and probably last!) karaoke. As

ever, my rendition of "Hey, Big Spender" was nothing like as hard as I thought it would be (except possibly for those listening)...is there a common theme here?!

Tobago was our second field course and by which time I knew we'd be busy, especially as all lecturers included the immortal words "this won't be a holiday, you know" in every discussion preceding our trip. However, even they were a bit taken aback by a 24-hour, 4 day music festival next door and the tail end of a hurricane causing torrential rain and zero visibility in the sea. It wasn't a holiday, and yet it was an incredible learning experience, as all our practical work has been. Who'd have thought I'd be able to conduct a belt transect across a mangrove swamp (my shoes have never recovered!) or study which density of sugar solution the humming-birds prefer to feed on?

My greatest enlightenment, and totally unexpectedly, I have found that I have fallen in love with learning. What's even more surprising to me is that I'm quite good at it! As a younger student at school and during my training for my former career I scraped through and just "did alright". Now I find myself in the running for a first class degree. It's not that I have got smarter in my old age it's just that I value the fact that I am lucky enough to be able to have this opportunity, so I'm going to make the most of it. It's also been about being "smart". The lecturers on our course clearly state what their expectations are for each piece of work and their marking schemes, so I use these as a rule book, why not?

The big question though is what about the whales? Well, somewhere along the way, possibly whilst looking at weeds growing in fields; kicking aquatic invertebrates into a bucket; identifying mosses through a lens; netting insects; counting limpets (we've done that a lot!) or even when we were examining seaweeds, my ambitions changed. I want to continue with my learning and research in the hope that I can strive towards a PhD before I'm fifty. Who'd have thought?? Now, who was it that said that "Life's what happens whilst we're making plans"? Best go and ask Mr Google.