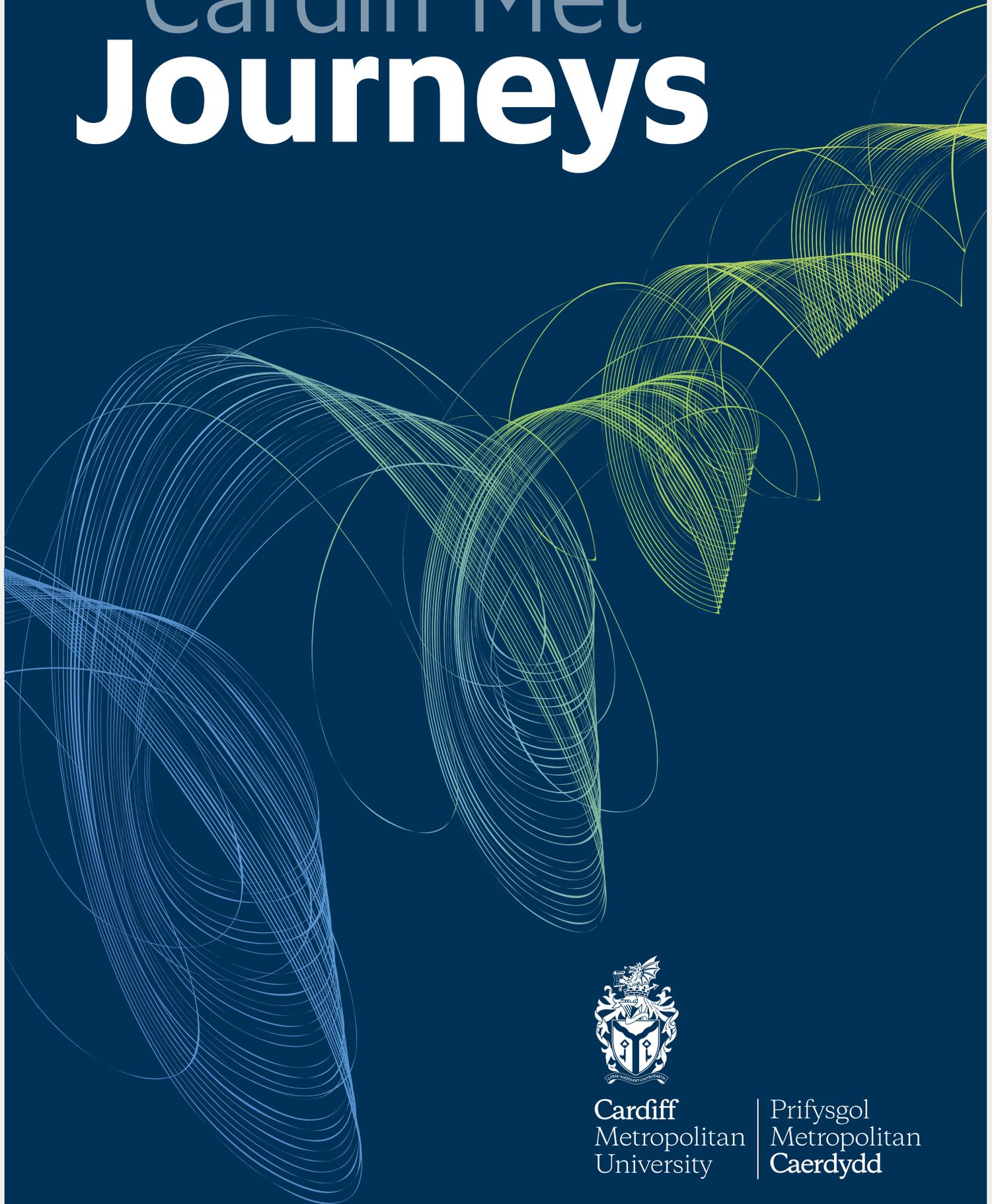


Cardiff Met **Journeys**



Cardiff
Metropolitan
University

Prifysgol
Metropolitan
Caerdydd

Introduction

In the past we have produced three adult learner **'Journeys'** booklets and this year we have decided to produce an online version.

The whole idea behind these booklets is to celebrate the success of learners' and to hopefully inspire others who may be considering returning to learning.

All the stories are told in the learners own words and show how they have succeeded by overcoming a wide range of barriers. They all show what difference learning has made and how their lives have improved through the process.

Each of their journeys show how with the right support and advice students grow in confidence and self-belief and often gain qualifications that they previously would not have believed possible.

We are sharing their stories with you in the hope that you find them so inspirational that you are moved into taking the steps to develop your own interests and find your own learning path.

We have a number of FREE courses running in community venues throughout Cardiff for you to have a taste of Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Come along and develop your skills,
start your own Journey today.



**“Just go for it!
Wholeheartedly
embrace it and you will
gain friendships, support
and confidence and then
in turn you can inspire
others and build their
self-esteem”**

I'm Debbie Rowlands, 47 years old, married and living in Cardiff with my two children and my husband. I work for Cardiff Council as a Learning Development Support Officer, engaging with learners across the city and trying to bring them into the education system.

I attended Fitzalan High School, which seems like a lifetime ago now. School wasn't the best arena for my learning but I did enjoy aspects of it. I didn't feel I was guided in the way I have been since leaving school. The classes were very large and I just blended into the background without anybody to motivate and coach me. Having said that, I did leave school with all the 'O' Levels that were necessary at the time.

I made the decision not to stay on at school as my parents felt it was more important to leave school and get gainful employment; the emphasis was on having a salary, a regular weekly wage for stability.

On leaving school I started a secretarial course as I felt my strength was in administrative duties. My first placement was at an estate agents office and I was offered the job within a couple of weeks. I learnt a lot in the first six months or so. I tried lots of different jobs and I did some bar work and canvassing but I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I tried to embrace each job and get what I could out of it, I learnt a lot about people and the way of the world in those days.

My career developed into fleet sales and that's what I did until I had a career break for the children. I stayed at home with the children taking a few part time jobs to fit around them like data entry.

The turning point came when I was interviewed for a job with Community Education, at what was then Glan Ely High School and is now Michaelston Community College. It was my first real part time role when the children started school. It was from here that my learning journey took off as I met so many people who helped me to get where I am today. I was given so much good advice and I learned about education, which changed my focus.

I started with several IT courses, progressing to advanced ECDL and City and Guilds. Then I had the opportunity to do lots of training, which enabled me to facilitate family workshops. I am very much a people person and I enjoy communicating with learners and trying to motivate and inspire them as I was throughout my learning journey.

I embraced this whole-heartedly and felt that I had found something that I really enjoyed doing. I went from strength to strength and an Adult Education Officer encouraged me to go further and that I could achieve at University. At the time I couldn't see this for myself as I still lacked confidence but I was encouraged to believe I could succeed and that it was achievable. That was when my journey with Cardiff Met began as I embarked on the FAETC course which led on to the PGCE course.

I absolutely loved the course, it was totally different from school and the people were wonderful. I worked with people from so many different backgrounds from Hairdressers to NHS staff, it was really interesting. I did find it a challenge if I'm honest, with working, the family and studying. It wasn't all plain sailing, but then nothing good ever is easy, is it? You've got to work at it and have the end in mind and you've got to want to do it.

Stumbling blocks came with deadlines and with volume of work, but the Tutors were absolutely fantastic. There was no comparison to my high school days, as the Tutors treated me like an equal; they gave me time and helped me plan. I can't thank them enough because there was no negative feedback and plenty of encouragement and help that enabled me to carry on.

I did take a year out due to personal circumstances, but I went back the following year. Again, I was really encouraged by the Tutors and my Colleagues to go back. The first few weeks were a bit strange as it was a different cohort of learners, but this meant I met even more people and gained even more friends and I really enjoyed it.

The course has enabled me to teach IT courses and I delivered intergenerational family learning projects after school, which led to a fantastic Grundvig Family Learning Project enabling me to go to Florence, Estonia and Bulgaria with the learners.

One particular learner was very nervous and really had low confidence; I told her where I started and where I came from and tried to inspire her. I managed to get her to start an IT course and at first she would say "I'll never master the computer" and I said: "Don't use the word 'never' in your vocabulary." and she's gone from strength to strength. I want to draw out the best from people, to help them to believe in themselves, because belief really is strong magic.

The advice that I would give is the advice that I received which is "Just go for it! Wholeheartedly embrace it and you will gain friendships, support and confidence and then in turn you can inspire others and build their self-esteem". I've definitely found that I've been able to do this and it's through my learning journey with Cardiff Met that I have developed these skills.

So, yes, I definitely feel it's life changing.



“The positive aspects of my journey are that I’ve made a lot of friends, broadened my horizons and it has made me a lot more confident.”

I'm Emma Winstanley, I'm 32 and I went to Whitchurch High School. I didn't really enjoy school as I've got dyslexia and I didn't get the support I needed whilst I was there. I did get GCSE's and CSE's, but at the time it didn't feel like I could go to University or do A Levels, so I went on to do Hairdressing.

I didn't like hairdressing so I went back to school where I did my GNVQ in Health and Social Care. After this I went on to do Nursing, working as a Nursing Assistant for a few years. I then went back to College as mature student to do an Access to nursing course. However, I fell ill with mental health problems so I had to take a step back from work and education for a few years.

I was at a bit of a loss after I had depression, so I went to Severn Road Neighbourhood Learning Centre to do Counselling and Psychology for two hours a week, where I met some lovely friends who encouraged me to go to the Summer School in UWIC which is now Cardiff Metropolitan University to do an Introduction to Psychology course. From there we all went on to do a Foundation in Social Sciences at UWIC.

I was really nervous about doing the course as I thought I couldn't do it as I have dyslexia and all these problems, but I had support from Student Services and friends and I finished my foundation in Social Sciences. I went on to do my Psychology degree and it was really difficult but I did have a lot of support from my family and friends and also Tutors, Student Services and the Mental Health Team were all very supportive. I also had a Dyslexia Support Worker who helped me a lot, especially through the bad times. It was really difficult and it did take me longer than usual, but with everyone's support I did get through University.

At the moment I am a volunteer for a mental health charity where I'm hoping to get experience and further my job opportunities and then I'm hoping to go further with my education, because I've got the bug, I would like to do Counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

The positive aspects of my journey are that I've made a lot of friends, broadened my horizons and it has made me a lot more confident. I have still got dyslexia and mental health problems, but it has enabled me to come out of my shell. I think even if you have got any of these problems you shouldn't let them hold you back.

“Thanks to everybody I met back in Cardiff who helped me succeed in pursuing my goals for education, you’re all wonderful people”

I worked for 13 years after finishing my academic studies; my career started by chance in the auto-industry and progressed smoothly. I had my own 4x4 land cruiser, a lovely small apartment not too far from the beautiful “Red Sea”, my parents lived close by and I used to visit every weekend. My professional career in the automotive business was secure and my life just couldn’t be better. Until I came across some life changing decisions, which I thought, were for the best at the time.

Here's my story: I am a Syrian national, born in Saudi Arabia; I was born there because my parents worked and lived there for many years. Endowing the children with a good education was very important to my father and since he studied in French schools, we eventually followed through the same methodological educational path.

I gave my dad a tough time during my school years, I just wasn't serious about education at all, albeit I was told that I was smart and attentive compared to other friends, but I seemed a little latent with education. After so much effort and patience from Dad pushing me through my educational path, I finally managed to graduate from University in Feb 2000 and returned home with a diploma in mechanical engineering. My father just couldn't believe it; a nightmare that lasted for many years was finally over.

A couple of months later, after my return to Saudi Arabia, I got a job as technician in an auto dealership. It wasn't the type of work I expected being an engineer but turning back to my father he said these simple words: "I know you deserve better, but unlike others you have a diploma in engineering, be patient and with hard work you'll definitely move up in your career. He was right, before I knew it I was managing the after-sales department of a prestigious auto- dealership. I had practical experience, which was unusual amongst other managers, plus the right knowledge to run a service department. I was at the peak of my career and life just couldn't be better.

However, five years later in 2005, my family decided that it was time for them to move back to Syria. That's where everything started to change for me. Things weren't the same anymore, as I was living alone now, being in Saudi Arabia without a family was no easy life. That's because of the stringent Islamic rules of the country.

First there weren't many places where I could go. There are beaches, huge shopping malls and restaurants, but only families were allowed access. So many of the usual places where I used to go were off limits now. The next five years of my life was about going to work and back home again. I was losing my mind; life without a family was terrible. I had no friends, since everybody I knew during my childhood days had left the country even before I returned in 2000.

So in 2010 five years later, I decided to leave my job and everything about Saudi Arabia, to rejoin my family. I had enough of this harsh life and with the savings I had set aside, I went straight back to Syria to start myself a small business and work my way up from there.

Food is always in demand wherever you go; you need air to breathe, then water and food. So after a few months, I rented a small closed-up corner shop near my neighbourhood, which used to be a mini market and started to refurbish the place to turn it into a nice restaurant. Things were going well; I hired a chef to run the kitchen and the decoration and the rest of the set up was almost done, until the unexpected happened "The Arab spring".

We hoped that the situation that took place in other countries like the Yemen, Libya, and Egypt would not have repercussions on us in Syria, but it did and a lot worse than anyone could imagine. My beautiful country became a war zone over night, the army had mobilized heavy artilleries and tanks all over the city and in nearby towns. Militias sprung around from everywhere claiming land and people's homes, to retaliate and fight the army. Thieves took this as an opportunity in the mist of the war to rob homes and kidnap innocent people for ransom.

It all happened in a blitz, buildings were blasted away and many people died frivolously. We hoped that this nightmare would last a few months, but it went on for a year and then the next, until no one was safe anymore. Leaving your home to acquire basic food supplies were a risk not every person was willing to take. With hope to survive with the family, it was time to leave Syria carrying whatever we could and head for safety; weeks later I reached the UK with only a part of my family. The rest of us were scattered around in other countries.

My first stop was Cardiff, a nice convivial City and there I was roaming the streets looking for a job. It was difficult to find work especial due to the recession. After a few days I found myself standing in queue at a place called the Job Centre. For a moment I closed my eyes thinking about my family and the responsibilities I had on my shoulders. Everything that had happened and now they looked to me with hope I would come up with a solution to survive. It was too much to bear and every day with a smile I kept saying tomorrow would be a better day. I wasn't going to give up, I couldn't do that option.

I realised in order to succeed and increase my chances in finding work the best thing to do was to seek education. I looked up Universities for the next few days that taught the profession I knew best and I found that University in London. When I applied they asked me to submit an academic IELTS exam test. I almost lost my final hope, until I volunteered as an interpreter for ISSA Wales. They're a volunteering community who provide public assistance and it was from there that I got introduced to Cardiff Metropolitan who provides training for people in IELTS at the Community Centre.

Thanks to everybody I met back in Cardiff who helped me succeed in pursuing my goals for education, you're all wonderful people. Your assistance is engraved deep my heart, I thank you for giving me hope and I thank you for helping me succeed in passing my IELTS examination test.

This time there is no need for my father to push me along my educational path. I found out that there is no other way to succeed without hard work and we should never say it's too late, because it's never too late until you die.

I just hope I will be able to repay in some way all those friends and teachers who gave me a helping hand.



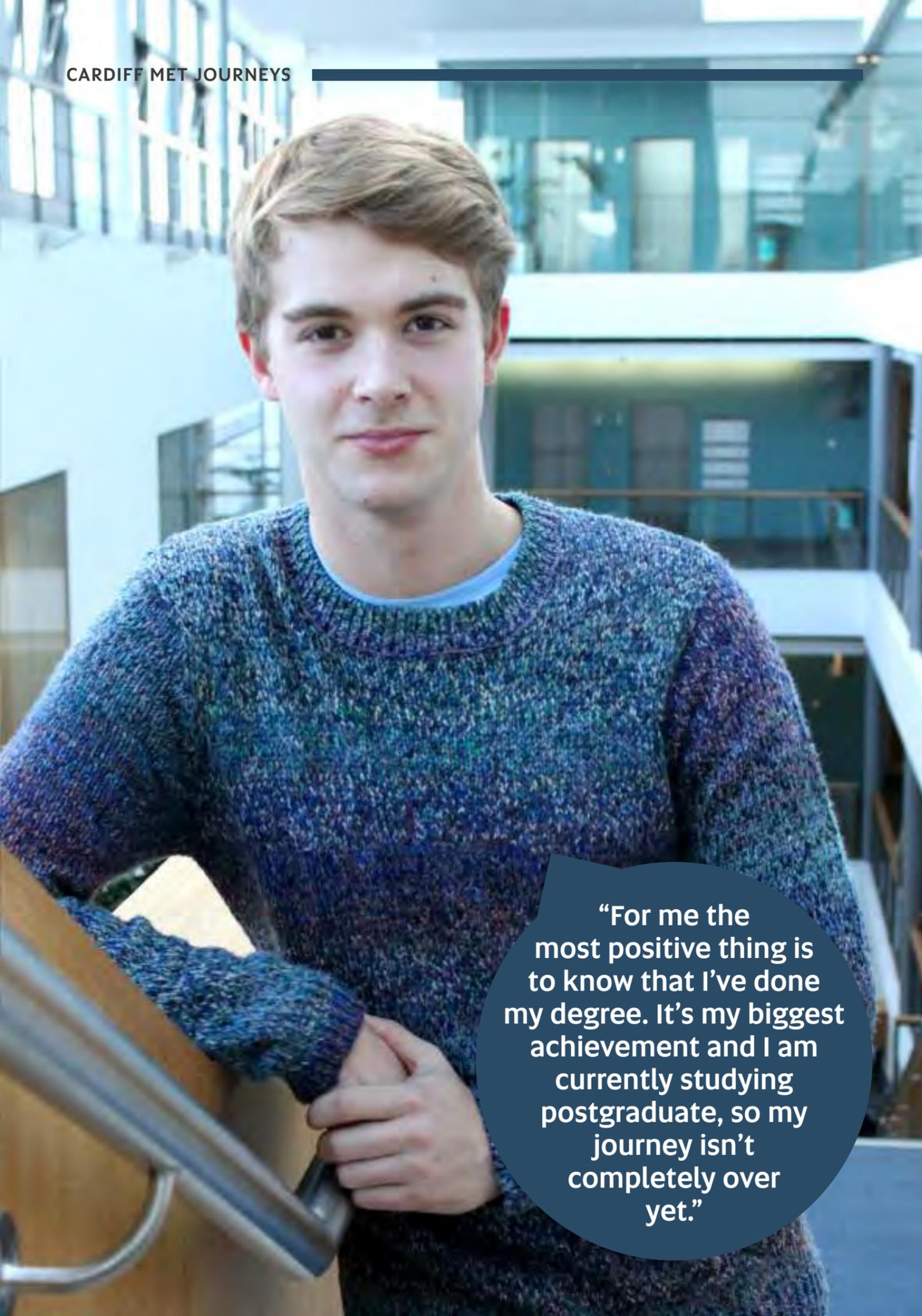
“There are just amazing opportunities so I would say just break it down, take one step at a time, you will definitely fulfil your potential and reach your goals.”

Hello my name is Njide Ezechi, I'm here to talk a little bit about learning in your community. My background is teaching, I have a lot of teaching experience working within community groups. I worked for Cardiff Council as a Community Learning Tutor and later on in management. I would like to express my enthusiasm for the whole community learning process. As it takes students from whatever their background and nurtures them linking with Cardiff Metropolitan University.

I have been very fortunate in my career as I now work at Cardiff Metropolitan University and even though this is a different role I still see that there is a lot of nurturing for students who come through various Widening Access courses. Here at Cardiff Metropolitan they go from strength to strength, sometimes ending up back here teaching or tutoring. I do think it's a wonderful experience and I just want to say that it's a great thing that is done by Cardiff Metropolitan University, they have a great knack for doing this and I commend them for that.

I would say for anybody who is considering a course to definitely go for it. With this type of learning journey, especially with Cardiff Metropolitan University it breaks it down for you, you take it one step at a time and you don't know where it will lead. It's about harnessing your own potential, looking at what the opportunities are and they really are endless.

There are just amazing opportunities so I would say just break it down, take one step at a time, you will definitely fulfil your potential and reach your goals.



“For me the most positive thing is to know that I’ve done my degree. It’s my biggest achievement and I am currently studying postgraduate, so my journey isn’t completely over yet.”

My name's Phil, I'm 22 years old and I'm a Health Psychology student at Cardiff Met. I went to Treorchy Comprehensive School in the Rhondda and I chose to study psychology at Cardiff Met.

The first time I came across First Campus I was preparing for my GCSE exams and doing coursework. It was useful to have a relationship with someone who was able to give me advice and I was able to get the information that I needed.

When I was in the second year of my Psychology degree I came across the Mentoring program. I trained to be a Mentor and so I got to see the other side of the relationship. Again, that was useful for me because it enabled me to see why school pupils need that kind of support and it was a very rewarding experience for me.

When I was an undergraduate I had to make sure I had a good balance between my academic work, my social life and also my work commitments, which can seem very daunting, but you become used to it very quickly. It's worth remembering that it's important to have your academic work prepared to a good standard.

For me one of the best opportunities was to sign up to the First Campus residential. I saw pupils gaining a lot of confidence very quickly. I think that was because they had the opportunity to speak with students who were already studying and they could give them first hand accounts of how they overcame the barriers to University. They realised that it's not always as challenging as they imagine it to be and when challenges arise they can be overcome with the support of friends, student services and support from the lecturers.

For me the most positive thing is to know that I've done my degree. It's my biggest achievement and I am currently studying postgraduate, so my journey isn't completely over yet. I've achieved a lot and having the opportunity to work with First Campus along the way has been outstanding.

“I did my Access course in College and I was absolutely adamant that I was going because I wanted to be the first one in my family to go to University”

My name is Kayleigh, I'm 22 years old and doing a full time course in Health and Social Care at Cardiff Met, Llandaff Campus.

When I was in school I didn't go very often, through personal difficulties at home, even though I really enjoyed education. We did a First Campus residential trip when I was fourteen, where we stayed at Cyncoed Campus for a few days and it was fantastic. We did sports and had a party at the end of it. I really enjoyed it as it opened my eyes to how great University could be, even though I didn't think I'd get in because I didn't go to school very often. This was not through personal choice, but that was just life at the time. I left with quite a few GCSE's, but I still didn't think it would be enough to get into University.

After I left school I had two children and I went back to University at twenty-two. I did an Access course to get into University and attended a few of the open days, but...I kept freezing.

I think the turning point for me coming to University was the residential; it really helped, even though at that point I thought it was only for people with a lot of money and for people who were highly educated and I really didn't think I would get that sort of chance.

I did my Access course in College and I was absolutely adamant that I was going because I wanted to be the first one in my family to University and leave with a degree and that is what has happened, I'm the first one.

When I was in school I had no choice about which course I was put on because I was in care the course was allocated for me and I was put onto Health and Social Care. To be honest I didn't really know much about it, but I actually really fell in love with the course, I found it quite a broad subject and I enjoyed it. I thought I could go off and do social work; I've now changed my mind completely after coming onto this course because I like the idea of teaching psychology and even becoming a police officer, which you can do from the Health and Social Care topic.

That's primarily why I think I wanted to do it because it's a broad subject and you can go off and do many things from it and after I finish this degree I'm hoping to go on to a Masters, maybe in Child Psychology.

It's difficult to try and balance home, studies, children and everything! But it can be done, if you all organise yourself. For example, I've got a diary and I've got different folders for different lessons and if you allocate your time properly you can have fun – there's nothing wrong with having fun. Then again, you do come to Uni to get a degree and if you want that degree you've got to work hard for it, so fun, work, play, children and everything can be pushed together – if you put your mind to it, it can be done.

Advice I would give anyone coming to Uni: I would say pick your course properly, choose wisely, because you don't want to start it and realise you've gone onto the wrong course. Also, I would say, don't spend your money all at once when you get it because it sounds like a lot, but you can spend it very quickly, but then saying that there is nothing wrong with spending some of it on having fun as well, because I think that's what it's there for too!

I think the residential helped me a lot with University if I'm honest; the First Campus residential opened my eyes to something I didn't think were achievable. I still didn't think it was, because like I said no one else from my family had got a degree or gone to Uni so at that point I still didn't think I'd be able to do it, but with determination and pushing myself I got in successfully the first time I tried. I got all five of my options so I'm really pleased with that. I choose Health and Social Care because like I said it was a broad subject so I think if you're adamant you're going to Uni then you're going, it's as simple as that, just keep pushing yourself.

“Everybody can do it, for some it’s easier; for some it’s more difficult, but I believe that every single person can do this”

My name is Clare Elmi Glennan - I am currently an Associate Tutor in the Department of Applied Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

My learning journey started positively in primary school, I had lovely teachers and great friends in fact I am still friends with some! Altogether my early education was a very happy experience. I came from a working class background, mum was a housewife and dad worked in Cardiff dock. I was the youngest of six children so there wasn't a lot of money in the house, but we were always happy. Overall, I have good memories of my early childhood; even going into high school was exciting and I enjoyed both the educational and social aspects of secondary education.

However, I became a little bit disaffected with education about half way through high school, just about the time I was due to choose my options. Even though I expected and felt that I was capable of taking O Levels in the subjects I had chosen, I was placed in a middle band and told that I would be taking CSEs. I was really disappointed by this, I quote my English teacher who said "Clare, you are capable of doing O Levels, but the higher set is full and unless your parents come and make a fuss, the middle set is where you will stay" She attempted to reassure me by suggesting that a grade one CSE is the 'equivalent' of a C grade at O Level; the word 'equivalent' stayed with me.

I completed nine CSE's and achieved a grade one in each of them, the 'equivalent' of nine O Levels – C grade. This was not good enough for me I had a point to prove so I went into sixth form and I did all of the O Levels again! I should have been concentrating on A Levels, had I done so maybe I would have participated in university earlier. Looking back, I acknowledge that I was stubborn and headstrong but it all just seemed so unfair to me that I was being held back educationally because my parents didn't know how to fight a system. I had hoped that I might go to university one day but I was beginning to realise that in fact it was more likely not to happen, particularly as I didn't have A Levels. No one from my family had participated in higher education so there was no expectation either. After completing one year in the sixth form, I just wanted to give up on education and be 'out there' earning money.

Having been 'out there' for only a few years I got married at the age of 21. My husband was in the Merchant Navy so I was able to travel around the world with him. After ten years my marriage came to an end, I was in my early thirties and had four young children to support. I had been employed as a teaching assistant in primary education for several years by this stage, so thankfully I had a means of supporting myself and the children. Although I was very happy as a teaching assistant I still felt that I was capable of doing more. I remember having a discussion with a classroom teacher on one occasion; I was talking about how some children who struggle with their learning were being left behind and how this seemed unfair; he replied: "Look, what do you know – you're not even a real teacher". Looking back this comment was probably one of the catalysts that led me to take action. I knew that I was capable of teaching, but I needed to get the qualification, the piece of paper so to speak.

I started along my educational journey again! I enrolled in night school and took an A Level in Psychology and a GCSE in Maths. I enjoyed the psychology course so much and I knew that I wanted to do something in and around that area. I also knew that I wanted to teach, so I looked at undergraduate courses in what was UWIC at the time. As my interests were in psychology and education I decided to look further into the Educational Studies and Psychology degree.

I remember the day that I phoned I was very nervous and put the phone down more than once – I was thirty seven, thinking: "What are you doing, you should be settling down, not thinking about going into Higher Education". I had a really good conversation with one of the course tutors who asked about my life experiences and my Learning Support Assistant work. It was a very positive conversation and I was provisionally accepted.

At the time I started my degree course I had re-married and had my fifth child. My daughter Ella was only a few months old when I enrolled! I went to fresher's week pushing her pram. I felt like turning around, running away, going for coffee or going home! My husband Rob was thankfully with me and he encouraged and

eventually pushed me in through the door and said: "You've got to go in!" it was just the most daunting experience of my life, it was like being in a youth club, I asked one of the lecturers "Do I need to be here for all of this, now?" he said: "If you don't want to be here for this, it's not necessary, I mean this is not the most important part for you".

On the first day of my course I walked into the Cyncoed campus and into a classroom, full of younger people. Initially, I felt like a fish out of water; I felt so different to the others, I had children, I had responsibilities. Strange how things change, I soon became very involved with the other students, learning from them as they learned from me. What is more, my children who were initially barriers to my learning (in terms of the time and commitment they required) soon became my motivation to learn. I wanted to show them that anything is possible! I like to think that I have also motivated them in their own learning. Whilst my son was going through his GCSEs he would come and sit with me as I studied and we would study together. We'd work in a comfortable silence, it was so nice for me as a mum seeing him work and I thought: "Wow! He's sixteen and he wants to sit with me." It was just a great feeling, a really great feeling.

Eventually, I came toward the end of my degree it wasn't easy, it was a real struggle often requiring me to burn the midnight oil, but I was determined to succeed. I can't explain where my drive came from, I suppose it came from a number of factors, the fact that I had wanted to participate for such a long time; believing that I was capable; off the cuff comments and friends and family pushing and encouraging me. It was scary, it was hard work, but I just knew it was the right thing and I just had to complete it. I completed my degree in 2009 I gained a first class honours one of the biggest achievements in my life! Unfortunately, my dear mum and dad had passed away in the last year of my degree, so they didn't get to witness my result, but I know that they probably know.

But this was not the end – completing my undergraduate degree was the beginning of a new journey. Shortly after graduation I was approached by Cardiff Metropolitan and asked if I would consider doing a PhD, an unexpected twist that led me in a completely different direction. Here I was again, lots of hard work and burning the midnight oil. A very difficult but a really worthwhile journey I graduated with my PhD in 2013 and I am now a Doctor. In terms of my education I went all the way and I feel content and have a sense of achievement, it's a really great feeling.

Finally, I would say to anyone who is thinking about engaging with education, believe in yourself and understand that you can do it! For some it's easy; for some it's more difficult, but I believe that every single person can do it and have a great time and some good laughs along the way!



“The best thing about the course was that the room was full of completely different people who were there for such varying reasons”

My name is Jen and I work for the University. About three years ago I used to work for the Widening Access department as the administrator. That was my first contact with Widening Access and with the students; a large part of my job was going out into the community and supporting the students who were just starting learning or just asking questions about things that were available at the University.

Often, I was the first contact with students who hadn't really engaged with education before and I found that this was a really inspiring thing to do and met loads of really wonderful people who were really interested in getting back into education but didn't know what their options were.

I spent quite a long time talking to them, asking what kind of subjects they were interested in and an idea came to me out of this. There were no photography courses for students that didn't have any formal training or maybe didn't have the equipment to take really professional standard photos. However, they did have access to things like phones or point and click cameras that they wanted to use. I wanted to develop a course for these potential learners and I found support from the Widening Access team who encouraged me to do a short course called Preparing to Teach, which started me on a journey to becoming a Widening Access tutor.

I did the ten-week preparing to teach course, there were about ten of us on the course and we had a fantastic tutor who was really supportive. The best thing about the course was that the room was full of completely different people who were there for such varying reasons, from such different backgrounds. It was really inspiring to talk to them about why they were there and how they got there. We helped each other to get through the course because everyone had a different story, a different amount of time that they could give to it and different subjects that they were hoping to teach in the future, so it was a really inspiring room of people.

As part of the course we needed to do a mini lesson to each other and the feedback from that seemed to give most people in that room the confidence to go on to the next stage with their teaching which was really, really inspiring.

When I completed the course I designed a course for Widening Access students called Photography With or Without a Camera. So basically you can come and spend two days learning different ways to take a photograph, compositional elements and different devices that you could use to take photographs that didn't necessitate you going out and spending a lot of money on really expensive camera equipment.

I ran the first course as a Summer School and we had a room of people who came with completely different objectives and completely different bits of kit and they all wanted to learn how to use it. It was a fantastic atmosphere because everyone just wanted to be there for the same reason, they all wanted to learn to take better pictures.

I kept in contact with some of the students from that first course and had some great feedback from them. Two or three of them had gone on to do accredited courses, short courses somewhere in the city and were planning to make a career out of taking photographs. Some were able to use their new skills to inform the work they were doing.

I know that a lot of the courses have the same sort of stories where people really feel empowered and lucky to have had an experience that really boosts them and gives them the confidence to carry on with their education.



“I’ve learnt so much, but the main thing I’ve learnt is that there’s always something else to learn.”

My name's Katherine Shea, I'm fifty years old and I've just graduated with Honours Bsc Health and Social Care.

I'm an ordinary, working class girl, Cardiff born and bred. Prior to coming into University I worked in retail. I didn't think that I could come into University, I thought that time had passed me by. I loved school and had a normal education, but unfortunately we lost my father when I was thirteen. This meant that at sixteen I had to leave school and go out to work, "cause in those days you brought money into the home, it's what you did". I never regretted it, but as I said I thought that my chance at further education had passed me by. Many years later a friend of mine who'd actually been on the course themselves and was now lecturing at Cardiff Met and working out in the community, literally put a prospectus in my hand and said: "Read it, this is you – this is what you need to be doing, you're wasting your time with what you're doing."

I had reached a junction in my life where my daughter was leaving home and I did it – I changed everything within a three-month period. I gave up work, I enrolled, I downsized where I lived and everybody thought I was having a midlife crisis!

I enrolled in Health and Social Care - I did it! As I had been out of education for so long I enrolled on the Foundation in Social Sciences first which leads to the Health and Social Care degree course. I loved my foundation course and passed which meant I could go on to my degree course, which I've now passed.

I found full time a little bit of a shock to the system, it's the best decision of my life. Initially, I had some support from my friend because she'd been through and she knew it. My daughter was extremely supportive as were close family and friends. On entry into University, student support, the Lecturers, the support staff and your peers all help – I mean there's just so much support here. You kind of get dragged into a separate world almost, but yeh, it's just the best decision I ever made and I suppose second only to the birth of my daughter, it's the best thing I've ever done.

It's the most rewarding thing I've ever done. It's changed me as a person for the better I hope and yeh on entry I probably had low self-esteem. Working in retail for so long you get lost, but I actually found myself here at University and am hoping now I'm the person I was meant to be.

The benefits are too numerous to mention to be perfectly honest. It gives you the option of a life that you'd chose for yourself. It gives you a chance at a career, not just a job. I was working to live, so you sort of do anything. Whereas now I'm on the verge of an incredible career that just four years ago I didn't think was possible for me. I would recommend this to anybody, it's never too late, I think I'm living proof.

It's incredibly hard, but that's what makes it so rewarding. If it's not hard then you're not doing it right. I had to learn all new time management skills, I had always worked long hours and I brought that with me and then realised that it's not really conducive to learning. I needed to be able to switch off so I needed to relearn to be able to learn. It was about making sure you took a day off a week at least just to relax and not read academic books and journals and not get too embroiled in it because it is really hard work.

I would say listen to your lecturers, they're there to help. You get given a personal tutor, go and see them if you're struggling. Student support at Cardiff Met is amazing because they will help you with anything. I think one of the other things is either start or join a study group because working with your peers and having people around who know exactly what you're going through helps – it's a lot of support and you do build bonds that will be with you for life.

Well, I think that I have come full circle. I started off as a beneficiary of Widening Access, it led me on to my degree. I've learnt so much, but the main thing I've learnt is that there's always something else to learn. I find myself a graduate with letters after my name and I now find myself working for Widening Access as a Tutor out in the community. This is an incredible thing as you meet so many amazing people: it's a joy and I'd just like to say that if I can do it then anybody with drive and determination can do it, it's never too late.

Go and get your career – it's out there for you.



“My dissertation just blew me away it was amazing because I loved it and I just loved doing it.”

Hiya, my name is Sarah, I'm 39 and I went to Willows High School. Unfortunately my parents were getting divorced as I went into High School, so I had no interest in learning whatsoever, my main interest was getting through the day.

I was quite rebellious and mischievous so I focused on friendships and having a laugh, which I don't regret even now because I feel it's really important to build good relationships. I left school and I went to college for two years part time to do hairdressing and basically it was just a means to an end. I had to have a trade because I was money mad and all my other jobs had been cleaning or waitressing. Hairdressing was good money; I went mobile and then didn't do anything else for eight years.

I just wasted about eight years partying. Then I gave my heart to Jesus and my life changed. Firstly I volunteered with a Homeless Centre with my church for four years Monday to Thursday. In this Homeless Centre they would come for food, clothes and a shower and I used to cut their hair. It was just absolutely amazing as when I was cutting their hair I had a lot of one to one with them and a lot of them had been in foster care and unfortunately some had bad foster carers and this was stored in my mind.

One day my friend said that her and her husband had been praying for me and the word they come up with over and over again was 'rejection' and I was just shell shocked because it dawned on me that was the reason that I wasn't using the brain. I wouldn't apply for any courses or probably wouldn't even think of them, in case I failed or I was just simply rejected.

So straight away I enrolled for an introduction to psychology and counselling course. This was a thirty-week courses run by the Council. I walked into the class and it was just all about life. Well, like I said, I had done nothing for eight years but I had plenty of experiences of life. The group I was with were all starting University and I got in on this momentum. I sat at an enrolment day and the building was packed and I was just thinking: 'What am I doing sat here?' I filled out a form and I remember watching people talking on a screen and I remember a woman saying: "I was volunteering for Women's Aid and now I've got a degree." At the time I was volunteering for Women's Aid, again using my hairdressing and I thought: Wow, I can relate to that woman, she seems normal, not your typical University type of person'. So then I'm in University and I'm sat in a lecture and I'm thinking: 'I just don't know how I'm here!' but I loved it and I was absolutely fascinated by it.

I was on a foundation course and one day I walked into one room and the woman started talking about Labour and Conservative and I put my hand up and said: "Excuse me, is this lesson about politics?" she said: "Yeh" and I said: "I don't do politics." Hah! When I think back, I cringe! She was an amazing lecturer and she said to me: "Did you have free milk when you were in school?" and I said: "Yeh" and she said: "Did it stop when you were about ten?" and I said: "Yeh – funny enough it did!" and she said: "That's politics." And she just gripped me.

Anyway, she was my dissertation supervisor – that's another story. So I started University and on the enrolment day I remember two things that the lecturer said: "Don't be afraid of the books."

He said: "Read, read, read, read more and then write." And without sounding condescending, University is that simple, do what the lecturers tell you, listen and read and the rest will follow.

I'm all or nothing so I said to my friends and family: "Look, I'm in University now so I'll see you in four years." I did see them in four years, because if they're genuine friends and family they'll still be there, because I was just so focused and I read, read, read. The more I read the more I realised I how much didn't know, I was so enthralled. What I learnt as well was a lot of my friends were scared to start typing, and I thought, I couldn't have that fear. I would advise anyone, don't procrastinate and put things off, just do it, don't be scared to start.

My dissertation came along so fast; I was originally going to do it on 'Why do foster carers stop fostering' because I'm a respite foster carer, which I started during University. It made the work come even more to life and gave me so much more understanding. It was definitely an advantage studying whilst I was a foster carer, as it helped balance work/home/study.

I didn't balance the first for four years as I didn't iron, I didn't clean and sometimes my flat would be like a bomb had hit it. I would wait and I use all my energy up cleaning as I was thinking. I walked every day, that's really important to get some fresh air and I had one day off a week where I wouldn't even pick up a book, "cos you have to rest as well."

I changed my dissertation because I did a lesson on a community and I studied the travelling community and was absolutely horrified at what I found out. I thought they were thieves, they shouldn't be trusted and they were dirty and that you shouldn't go near them. When I started reading about them I was disgusted at how my view had been shaped by the media. I was so sad when I read the statistics on: cot death, stillbirth, suicide, depression, road accidents, and their lifespan. I was really saddened and I thought there is no way I can do my dissertation on my original plan now. I went over to Ireland to visit friends and I met two Christians over there that worked with travellers. They introduced me to travellers and I did my dissertation on 'How are travellers affected when they return to their community following foster care?' My dissertation just blew me away it was amazing because I loved it and I just loved doing it.

Your dissertation consumes your life so do it on something you enjoy and bring it alive. I interviewed a traveller who had been in care and it was just amazing, it has helped me so much, again as a respite foster carer. So I finished University and the Graduation day is just outstanding and if had known how I had felt that day I wouldn't have moaned so much during the build up to it. It's brilliant, you feel like a queen, I was very emotional. Then I rested for a full year. I'm doing a computer course now and I can't wait to start a Masters, because the more you know, the more you know you don't know. I'm not going to sit here and go: "Oh, I'm glad that's all over with." Because I loved it and I would say if you're going to do it – enjoy it and if you're terrified every day? You're supposed to be, that's normal.



“The courses are full of different people from different backgrounds and they’re fun. I think you can learn and you can have fun at the same time”

Hi, I'm Mel Squire and I work for the Widening Access team as a Tutor. I joined Cardiff Metropolitan University about three or four years ago. I was one of those people who dropped out of school and academia didn't suit me in school.

I was very lucky, I was invited by a Managing Director of a company to sign up to a course in College and that really changed my life. I thought College and University was full of professors and boffins and I quickly realised that Higher Education isn't like that. It is about having a goal, it's about working hard, it's about dedication, but it's full of people like you – like me. It's full of people that want something and are prepared to go the extra mile to get that goal.

One of the courses I run is called 'It's all about me! It gives an opportunity to get off that hamster's wheel of life and ask 'Who am I?' 'Where am I going?' 'What do I want to achieve?' and 'How am I going to get there?' It's fun, engaging and interactive. It is about discovering who you are and then by the end of the course they're making their own action plans and goals, they're inspiring themselves and other people on the course to think about their future. The courses are full of different people from different backgrounds and they're fun. I think you can learn that you can have fun at the same time. They're inspiring and people form friendships and there's a community of learners that happens naturally, that's not forced. Each course is different, it has its own personality, but each course helps us as our confidence grows. It helps us crystallise our future direction, it gets us excited about our future.

I think one of the biggest barriers is confidence. People often say to me that just picking up a telephone or coming on day is really nerve wracking and I understand that – I've been in that position. All I will say is that you're guaranteed a warm welcome we are a team that are passionate about inviting people into Higher Education. We make people feel welcome and invited and individual. If you have particular individual needs, issues or challenges then by all means we'd like to hear those and we'll do our best to tailor our teaching around that.

If confidence is an issue, that's part of the essence of the course and part of the rationale is about growing your confidence, and changing a 'can't do' attitude. People often say to me: "Oh I can't do that, Mel, I can't do that" but by the end of the course they're saying: "I can do that" and "I will do that" and "I'm going to do that" people often report that it's significantly life changing in many instances. The whole Widening Access team ethos is about opening the door and exploring the options for yourself. Maybe another barrier is feeling: 'I can't do that – it's not for me.' Well, you don't know until you try, all I can say is that when people do come along they have a warm welcome and they usually do enjoy the journey, as I said they make new friends and in some instances it can be life changing.



I suppose my background is a bit unconventional as I only attended primary school for a short amount of time and then my mum decided to teach us at home. She was worried about us going into a class with a teacher who was smacking the children and as she was at home felt that she could teach us it. It was very unstructured and ad hoc. I remember getting on the bus with her and going to the market, haggling for vegetables – that could be considered to be maths I suppose!

It could have been isolating, but it wasn't. There were five of us and my mum also fostered on and off and took various people in who needed somewhere to stay, so we had quite a sociable childhood. Like most kids in the seventies we spent most of the day running around outside and only came in for dinner in the evening. My parents were musicians and they would teach people's children music in exchange for lessons for us, so we did have a few maths lessons and a lot of French lessons with an amazing woman who also did pottery with us and taught us all the rude words she knew in French. My dad got a job in Wales when I was twelve so we moved here and I started school. It was a HUGE shock, as I wasn't used to the structure or uniforms or to treating teachers as though they were high status and accepting the low status role we were expected to have as pupils. It was difficult socially for a long time and the academic side of it was always secondary to just getting through. Having said that I managed OK and stuck to arty subjects, as they were more familiar to me.

I got A Levels and went on to Drama school to study acting and music. My first degree was not academic, aside from the dissertation, which we were given little guidance for. I wasn't interested in study – I liked doing things and was very committed, but thankfully it was all vocational training.

I will condense the next fifteen years to save some time, I lived in London and worked in television in a variety of roles. The company I worked for was bought out when I was on maternity leave and everyone was made redundant. I became a single parent at about this time and spent over a year out of work living in a hostel with my son. Eventually, I found housing and got another job in television, before moving to Canada and breaking into the television industry there. I came back to the UK to care for my 95 year old Grandma who needed full time live-in care and did not want to go into a residential home.

By this time I had two children, was a single parent and was on maternity leave again so was able to make the move back to the UK and become a live-in carer for my Grandma. Although, the television work had been a lot of fun, I hadn't really felt that it stretched me or fulfilled me. Nor did it tap into any of my core skills and aptitudes. The other problem was that it meant lots of time away from the children and didn't offer much stability for us as a family.

I had always wanted to do some kind of therapy, but didn't feel I had enough life experience when I was younger. When I lived with my Grandma and the children it became clear to me that I really enjoyed caring for others and wanted to do something that would enhance the quality of other people's lives in some way. I didn't know where to start and I had no confidence at all in my academic skills. One day my other Grandmother came over to visit and told me that I should be a Speech and Language

Therapist! I didn't even know what one was and I thought it sounded quite dull. However, I did as I was told and looked into it and realised it was absolutely fascinating, a really broad and varied field.

By this time my Grandma was 97 and she passed away. It was a very painful experience having lived with her for that time, the sense of emptiness I felt when she was gone pushed me towards taking the next step to a new career.

I had done a weekly art course at a local Community Education Centre (it was the only class with spaces and childcare!) and discovered that they had a developmental psychology course for beginners. I enrolled and found it pretty straight forward, so this increased my confidence a little in my ability to study and was the first small step towards retraining as a Speech and Language Therapist.

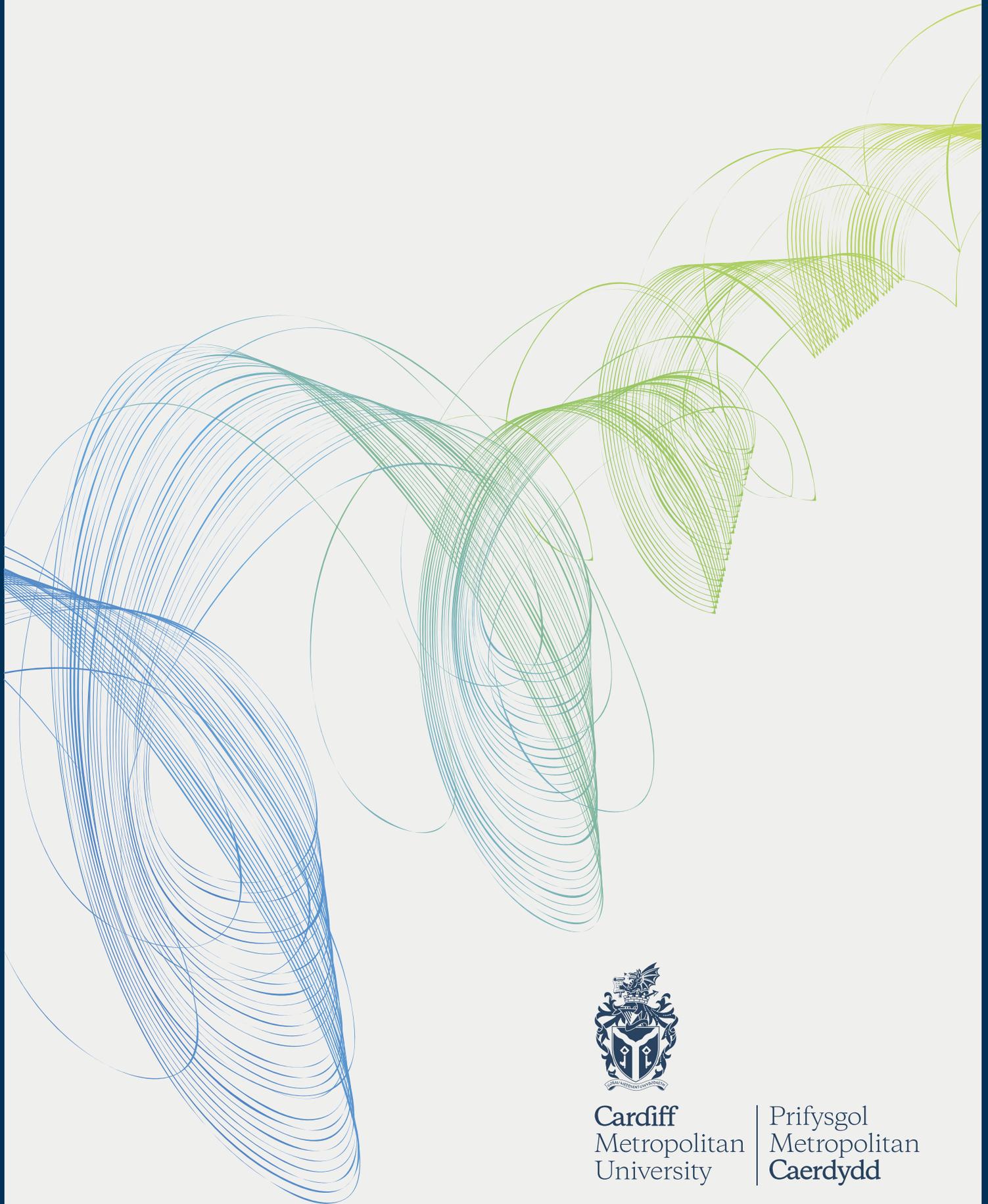
I called the University and asked what I would need to get on the course, hoping that my undergraduate degree from Drama school would help. The answer was no! I would need some kind of science at A' Level to convince them that I could get through the course, which is a BSc.

I enrolled in the Access to Nursing course at Glan Hafren, knowing that I was coming up to forty, I felt that failure was not an option. By this point I was desperately focused and had to get a large number of distinctions on the Access course to quality, but I worked like a fiend. Thankfully they also had a nursery so I could take my youngest with me every day, which made it possible.

I passed and got a place at Cardiff Metropolitan, I remember the day I found out that I had got in. There's nothing like the high you get from working towards something yourself and then attaining it – it feels amazing. I am now in my third year and believe me there are times I find the course incredibly tough. There is a lot of work and I have to balance it with being a decent mum. There are times that I feel I am doing a shoddy job at both and money is permanently tight, but having said all that it is possible and I have learned so much about what I am capable of when I put my mind to it!

In my second year my son was going through a major medical condition and we had to travel to London to visit a specialist clinic. It was a very emotional time and was also quite physically exhausting. I have definitely found that openness and communication with tutors is the best policy. As long as they knew what was going on and I kept them informed, the University were very understanding and supportive. At one point I got quite overwhelmed and failed an assignment, but I resubmitted and it all worked itself out. There are things put in place to help and support students and the University want you to succeed. It's not possible for me to run an immaculate home-life and University life in parallel and there are times I do a half job of both, but I give the kids a massive hug, sit down, breathe and forgive myself.

I keep my mind focused on Graduation day and having my kids there with me to celebrate our triumph because when you have a family everyone is contributing to the degree in some way. The kids are my motivation. I could never let them see me fail at something because I want them to believe in themselves and feel that they can do anything they set their minds to as well.



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