



A SILVER LINING? A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORST 18 MONTHS OF OUR LIVES

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I am the youngest child of two Albanian parents who have always worked hard to provide for my sister and me. We were amongst the first generation in our entire family to be going to university, and the feeling of your parents being proud of you for such an achievement will always remain unparalleled to me. I knew from a young age that science and maths were not my favourite subjects, and that I much preferred discussion and reading-based subjects such as English and Religious Studies, which led me to developing an interest in journalism. To be honest, I am not entirely sure where the career switch came from, but since I was about 15 years old, I became certain about pursuing a legal career. The profession is respected and valued, and I have always loved thought-provoking discussion. I personally feel that a legal career offers job security, in that people constantly require legal assistance and as there are so many jobs within the legal profession. You don't even have to become a lawyer, as the degree provides you with a plethora of transferrable skills to take into different careers.

When selecting my university choices, Plymouth always appealed to me. I definitely felt nervous about moving three hours away from home, and I think my parents were too, but they remained supportive of my decisions. I loved Plymouth when I had visited on an applicant day and liked how close it was to the city centre, the sea, and how it was a campus-based university. It was a daunting experience visiting universities and beginning to realise that this next stage in my life was coming, whether I was prepared for it or not. Part of me was so excited, but the other part of me wanted to hold on to the stage of life I was in at the time, knowing where everything was, having friends who I've known for a long time, and having my parents so close. It was hard reminding myself that this was the next step in my life, but it helped having my friends go through the same emotions and feelings as me.

I remember moving in day so clearly. I loved my accommodation and how it was so close to

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campus. Seeing other students moving their stuff in really put me at ease, and the feelings that were nervousness turned back into excitement. After a tearful goodbye to my parents, I made my way to the communal space in the accommodation building and introduced myself to as many people as I could. I have always been quite good at meeting new people, and I felt reassured about this new experience I was embarking upon. I was definitely excited to finally be studying just one subject. I enjoyed my A Levels (Law, Psychology and English Literature & Language), but I was pleased to finally specialise in a subject area and to devote all my time to one field.

I, as many other students had, built up this idea in my head of who I wanted to be at university. It was my first time having total freedom and independence. I thought that all of a sudden everything about myself would change, and all my faults would magically disappear and I would become this perfect young adult ready to face the world. At this point, I had not realised that change will only come after self-reflection. It is important to make mistakes, to look at different perspectives, and to look at yourself and be honest. However, changing, growing up and 'pushing yourself' is much easier said than done.

I attended the Fresher's Fair and walked through the endless rows of stalls and representatives of different societies. There seemed to be something for everyone, no matter your interest. I found the University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS) and joined. I later attended the sign-up day, when students can sign up for the different competitions that UPLS offer, including client interviewing, mooted and negotiation, as well as others. I was filled with fear, but I kept thinking about this image of myself in my head, of who I wanted to be at university, so I forced my shaky hand to write my name on the sign-up sheets and left feeling accomplished and proud of myself.

I remember attending my first lecture and feeling so nervous. I did not know anyone on my course and so tactically sat alone in the middle of the lecture theatre. I remember seeing all the lecturers who would be teaching me over the next three years and feeling almost in shock. I could not believe this was happening; I was officially a law student, I would graduate after three years with a Qualifying Law Degree and be one step closer to becoming a legal professional. I honestly enjoyed attending lectures, as I was interested in the content and the lecturers were approachable and made the course engaging. I remember the question being asked about students nominating themselves to be course representatives. This was something that I really wanted to do. I had experience with representative roles in school so felt that I would be good in a position like this. But I froze. I didn't raise my hand, and watched on as my peers, who were far braver than I, become elected in a role that I knew I would

have loved.

I had never really experienced burnout until getting to university, and I had never really heard too much about it until my third year, when I can now tell when I am experiencing burnout. In my first year I became burnt out very quickly; upon reflection this probably had a lot to do with the unrealistic standards I was setting and the pressure I was putting on myself. Instead of being patient and allowing myself time to recover and pace myself through my studies and commitments, I fell into a very negative headspace and was barely sleeping. It was almost like I was punishing myself for feeling this way. The worst thing to then happen was that I withdrew entirely from everything I was passionate about, including law. I had to force myself to attend my lectures, and I had lost the excitement that led me to pursue such an interesting degree in the first place. I remember crying in my room as I sent off emails to UPLS telling them I did not want to take part in the competitions anymore and having to message my assigned partner to tell them I could no longer compete. This only led me into a further negative spiral. I was not enjoying anything. The only event I had not cancelled was Cheese & Wine. This is arguably the most popular event held by UPLS, where local firms would come to a venue to network with members of UPLS. At the time I got my ticket for this event I was ecstatic, as it was my first ever legal 'event'. I was thinking about everyone who would show up, the work experience I would get there, all the people I would speak to and the connections I would make. Unfortunately, by the time the event arrived, I was in such a negative headspace I had completely freaked myself out and did not attend. This unfortunately became the case with a lot of events I had planned. I felt like I could not manage the workload of the actual course, so why was I spending time on all these other commitments? I was convinced I would never be able to do a good job on any of them. As aforementioned, I was unfamiliar with the sensation of burnout, and had no idea how to fix it. Before I knew it I was a shell of my former self.

Christmas break helped somewhat. It was nice being at home with my family, and it helped kick start my academic and extra-curricular motivations again. I had missed my family a lot and having a home cooked meal didn't hurt either. I felt that being around them would help lift my spirits regarding my university experience.

When I returned to university in January 2020, I had simply thought that with it being a new year, everything from the previous year no longer mattered and I had yet another opportunity to become this new version of myself. Unfortunately, I found myself slipping back into my old ways, quickly. My life consisted of lecture, tutorial, then home. I had a severe case of imposter syndrome, I thought I did not belong at university, and that I would be a terrible

lawyer. I felt like I was letting everyone down, especially the make believe, unrealistic image of who I wanted to be in my head. This cycle remained the same until March 2020.

I think we can all collectively agree that nothing has been the same since March 2020. I cringe whenever I hear the words 'COVID', or 'pandemic' on the news. I remember thinking at the time that it wouldn't be a big deal, and that pandemics are what you read about in history books, and if another one came, it wouldn't be in my generation. I recall reading the email that appeared in my inbox from the university, saying 'all face-to-face contact will cease after today', and my heart dropping. None of this felt real, and I, like many others, imagined it was going to be a nice two weeks at home. My phone started buzzing uncontrollably as my parents called me, frantically demanding when I was going to come home.

I'm sure we all have a different experience of the moment we realised this 'two week' quarantine was going to be a lot longer than we first thought. I would probably say mine was when there was no toilet paper. Anywhere. I remember being sat around the television with my family, watching the news and waiting in anticipation for Prime Minister Boris Johnson to dispel the rumours that had been circulating across Facebook and WhatsApp, from various people who somehow all had a friend of a friend who works in the military. Hearing him announce that we were in an official lockdown didn't even feel real, in a way.

I don't want to go into too much depth about what lockdown was like, as it was a tough time for everybody. Life as we knew it had been completely turned on its head. I really missed university. As much as I loved having my whole family at home and being able to attend my now online lectures in my pyjamas, I found myself missing Plymouth and university life a lot. It was nice having total freedom, being able to come and go as I please, being able to do things at my own pace. Of course, I understood why there was a lockdown in place, and this article is not intended to critique the legal measures taken over the past two years.

My results and motivation were affected by lockdown, as many others were too. It was so hard keeping track of time and my deadlines whilst being at home in these 'unprecedented times', a phrase which makes my skin crawl at this point. I managed to make it through my first year of university, somehow, and having the summer break from academia was very nice. I used this time to give myself a much-needed rest.

Summer flew by as it always does, and before I knew it my second year had begun. Having already booked my house for this year, I made my way back down to Plymouth, and prepared myself for a year of online study, as it was too unsafe to have our lectures in person. I wanted this year to be different, as lockdown had really given me time to sit and think about who I

was and who I wanted to be. The pandemic has been very difficult in varying ways for everyone, and I feel guilty for expressing this, but part of me felt upset and frustrated that I had been missing out on what was supposed to be the best years of my life. My university experience was stolen from me in the blink of an eye.

The second year provided me with a different perspective. COVID opened my eyes as to how quickly things can change, and I had spent my summer reflecting on why I had let myself down by backing out of all these exciting opportunities. In the past, I had bullied myself whenever I made mistakes, and I compared myself to everyone around me, wondering why I was so bad at something or why I could not bring myself to leave the house. I did not take the time to sit and reflect, nor was I patient with myself. It is very difficult to experience growth when you are not being kind to yourself.

In my second year, I did not join the law society, mainly because I felt that I would not be able to receive the full benefits that come with it if all events would be remote. In 2020 I received an email asking students if they would like to be a student representative. This felt like a sign, a second chance almost. I responded with my interest and achieved the position. I was finally starting to feel that things were falling back into place, and I enjoyed the role. I was passionate about hearing the views of my peers and making sure people were coping with our learning being entirely online. I had also decided to become a Student Ambassador. This position involved me representing the university at events, primarily Open Days. All my jobs were completed over Zoom in that year, which was unfortunate but obviously necessary. I also found myself enjoying my course a lot more. Of course, there were downsides, as I couldn't attend in person and there were restrictions in place, but I found myself making the most of things. I think the second year can be stressful for law students, because that is normally the time when they start applying for training contracts and vacation schemes. At this point I had not secured one, and so part of me still felt quite anxious, and at times it was tough reminding myself that I was trying my hardest, especially in the midst of, you know, a pandemic.

I never knew much about true reflection until I began my Work Based Learning (WBL) module in the second semester. My project related to digital rights and image-based abuse, primarily involving young people. I worked as part of a small group to create and deliver a presentation to a host of people working in education, as well as an expert in the area of digital rights. Inevitably, this all had to be done via Zoom, but I was incredibly proud of the work I produced.

A key part of the WBL module is self-reflection. Students are required to submit a reflective

essay, as well as multiple shorter reflective diary entries. Self-reflection is a skill that is very difficult to develop in yourself and my reflective skills are far from perfect, but completing this module allowed me to take the skills I learned from the (online) classroom and put them into practice. One of the best pieces of feedback I received was that the more you question things, the deeper your reflection will become. This is advice that I have now taken into my personal life. It can be hard to truly reflect on our own behaviours and attitudes, to set realistic goals and think about how we are actually going to achieve them. It takes constant endeavour, looking back at what you did and questioning whether it was a good idea, and would you have done the same thing again?

As a third year student, I can truly appreciate the challenges presented to me as a law student, and quite honestly the best thing about undertaking a law degree is the way it challenges you, and offers you a new way of thinking. This is what makes it so unique and exciting compared to other academic avenues. The past couple of years have been very difficult for all of us, and at the time of writing this there is another wave of anxiety amongst students, as they wonder what may happen to their education in regard to new changes and restrictions. I hope that in reading this, students will understand that it is okay to be unsure and to feel a bit lost in the midst of everything going on. University is often described as the best years of your life, and so it can feel frustrating to have these 'golden years' lived through a screen. It has been a tough time, both mentally and emotionally for students. But the thing I have taken from my university experience is to make the most of the opportunities around you. As daunting as it can be, take advantage of the networking events and workshops, the clubs and societies, and maybe try something new! There is so much to do and your time at university will fly by before you realise it.