



My Journey to Salford

Elaine Coates

Abstract

Elaine is a Level 4 Human Biology and Infectious Diseases student at the University of Salford. She tells her story about her journey to Salford. She explores her life before Salford, her motivations to come back to education and what she aims to do upon graduation from her course.

I have always loved science. I started a biology degree in 1987. I enjoyed the course, but I also enjoyed spending rather too much time in Manchester's rock clubs. I did enough work to get by but not much more, so I only managed a 2ii. I applied for a couple of degree-related jobs and didn't get them, I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do, so after a year of temp jobs I ended up training as an accountant. Life doesn't always take you in the direction you expect.

Fast forward roughly 30 years to spring 2022; I had a successful career as an accountant, but the project I was working on was due to end in 2023 and I was likely to be redundant at the end of it. I started thinking about the kinds of finance roles I could go for next, and I just couldn't get excited about any of them. I didn't want to be doing the same thing until I retired. Meanwhile my kids had left home, and as things started to get back to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic I realise I was *bored*. What did I actually want to do with this next phase of my life?

I initially started looking at taking a part-time course just as a hobby. I had always kept up with science news and I knew there were entire fields such as genomics and bioinformatics which didn't exist when I did my first degree. I looked into studying something like that, but the courses were all at Masters level. I was excited by the idea of studying though, and meanwhile I'd been looking at my finances and worked out I didn't *have* to go straight into another job. I realised this was an opportunity to change direction altogether.

I looked into what I would need to return to university as a mature student and found that an Access to HE course was probably the best route. It turned out that the college a 10 minute walk from my house offered a Healthcare Science Access course, two evenings a week- It was perfect.

The next step was to talk to my family. I hadn't expected any major objections but I thought they might challenge whether I was sure. Did I really want to risk giving up my job? Could I handle being a student again? But everyone was really supportive right from the start, which was great.

I started the Access course in September 2022. The next few months was tough. Access is the equivalent of 3 A-levels done part time over one academic year so it's pretty intense. I was working full time in a demanding job with long hours, then going to college two evenings and spending my other evenings and weekends completing the assignments. I had no spare time, but I enjoyed the course. I got good marks for my essays, and it gave me the confidence that yes, I could do this.

I had decided I wanted to do focus on human disease so I initially looked at Biomedical Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Salford and the University of Manchester. My first degree was from Manchester but the open day left me feeling I'd just get lost there as a mature student.

Salford seemed to cater well for commuting and mature students, and the Human Biology & Infectious Diseases course really appealed to me. I met Professor Nirmalan on an open day and she said, “please come”, and somehow it stuck with me. After a second visit I made Salford my first choice and I’m happy that I did.

In the end, when the project I was working on went live, the company did offer me the option of moving into another role, or taking redundancy. Giving up my income was a bit scary but by that point I had made up my mind about what I wanted to do, and I knew I definitely didn’t want the job on offer. I left at the end of July 2023 and started at Salford in September.

It took a little while for me to settle in, but after the first few weeks I started to see how the different modules fit together and it all started to make sense. I was a bit intimidated going back into a lab after so much time, but a couple of my lab partners had done a foundation year and they helped me find my way around. Joining the Mature Students society and meeting other people who have come back to education later in life has also helped me to feel at home.

It is still early days, but I have no regrets. I am enjoying the course and I hope that the degree combined with the transferrable skills I have will mean I can finally find my career in science. I may even consider a PhD.