

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

ISSUE 01: Resilience and Personal Growth alongside
Opportunities and Career Insights

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UCSE

The Next Chapter

The first alumni magazine from University Centre South Essex, celebrating our graduates and their journeys beyond university.



UNIVERSITY CENTRE
south essex

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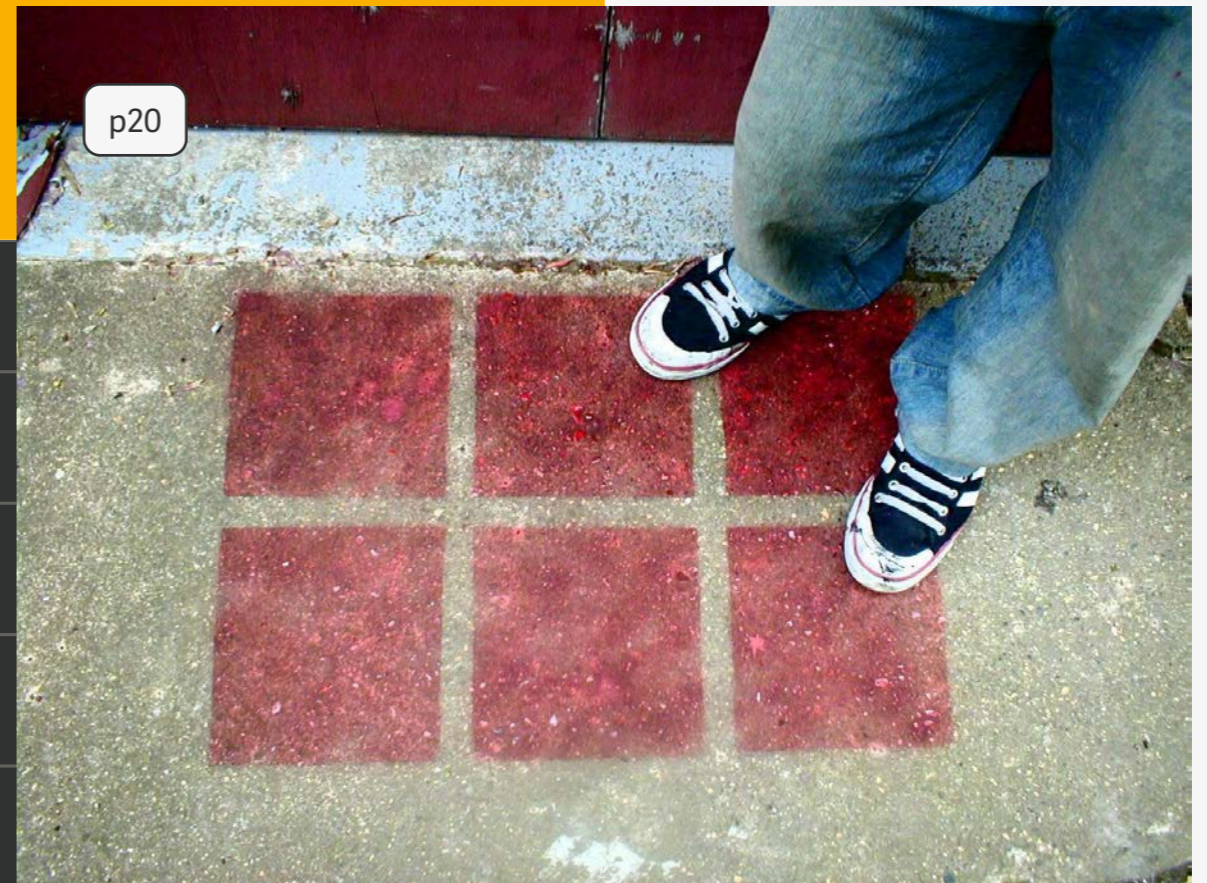
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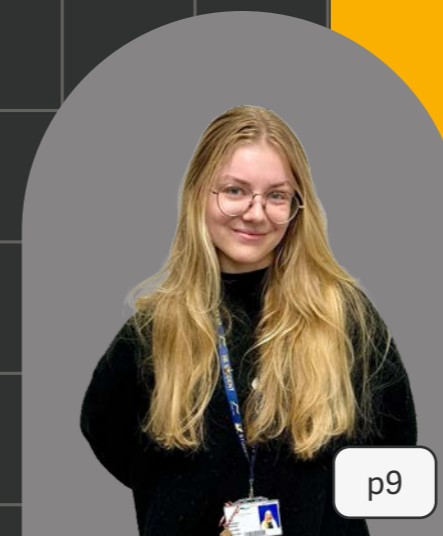
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Foreword **Sharon Dunphy**

Welcome to the very first edition of our Alumni Newsletter. It is a pleasure to reconnect with you and to share stories, opportunities, and insights that celebrate the journeys of our graduates and the community we continue to build together.

As we reflect on the theme of Resilience and Personal Growth, it is clear that the paths our alumni take are rarely straightforward. Each of you has faced challenges, whether in study, work, or life that have tested your determination and adaptability. Yet it is through these experiences that resilience is forged. The lessons learned in moments of difficulty often shape us most profoundly, helping us to grow into professionals and individuals who can lead with confidence, empathy, and purpose.

Alongside resilience, this newsletter highlights Opportunities and Career Insights. The world of work is evolving faster than ever, and staying connected with our alumni network provides a unique advantage. Within these pages, you'll find practical advice, career pathways, and examples of how fellow graduates have navigated change and discovered new opportunities. By sharing these experiences, we hope to inspire you to seize the possibilities that lie ahead, to explore fresh directions, and to continue your journey of lifelong learning.

This newsletter is not just a publication, it is a platform for connection. We want it to be a space where achievements are celebrated, challenges are acknowledged, and knowledge is shared. Whether you are at the beginning of your career, exploring new ventures, or established in your field, your experiences matter and your voice can encourage and guide others.

Thank you for being part of our alumni community. Your resilience, growth, and contributions are what make this network strong and vibrant. We look forward to growing this community with you and to sharing many more opportunities, stories, and successes in the future.

Sharon Dunphy, Deputy Executive Director - HE and Quality

Editor's Note **Nick Smith**

Welcome to this edition of the UCSE alumni magazine. As Careers Coordinator and Editor, it is a privilege to introduce stories that powerfully reflect our core themes this year: Resilience, Growth, and Community.

This issue showcases the diverse and inspiring paths of our graduates. From Hannah Wilkins' perspective-shifting kinetic art to Jessica Bernard's award-winning work humanising automotive technology, these stories highlight how a UCSE education serves as a launchpad for innovation and impact.



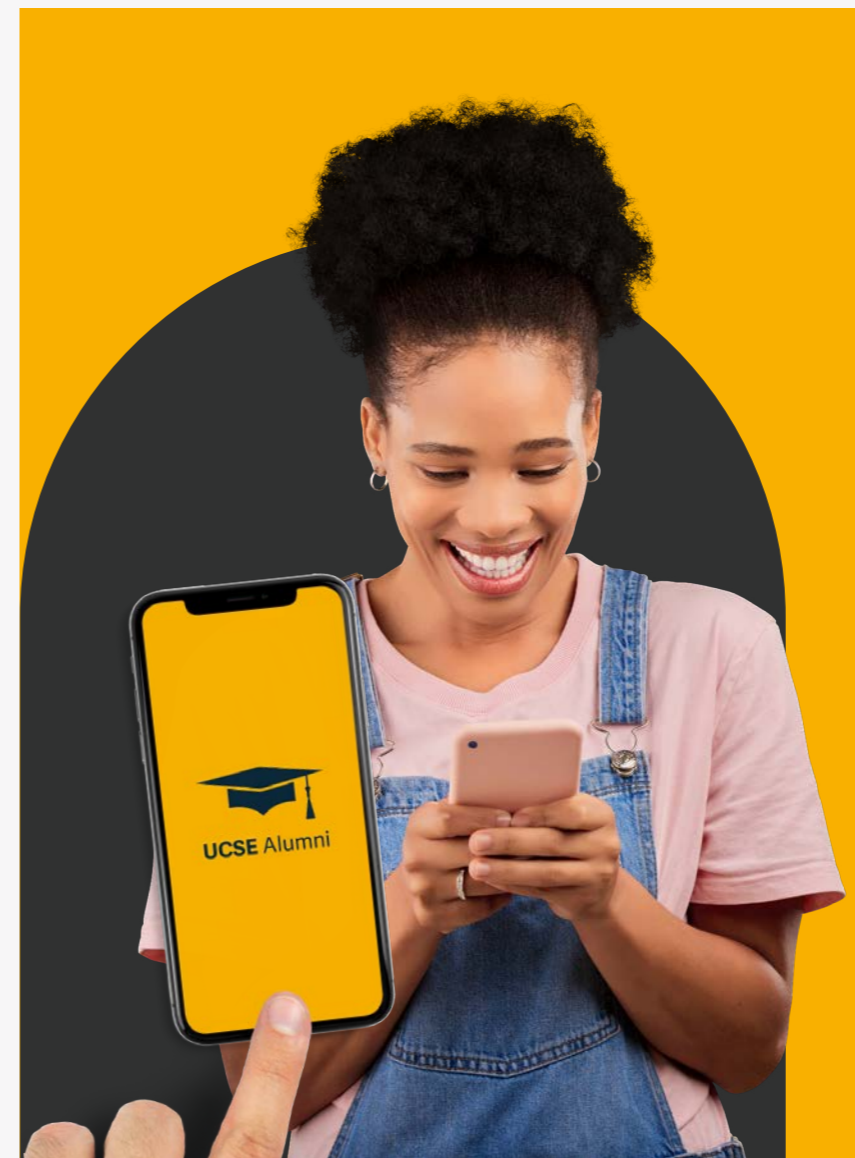
We also celebrate resilience within our community. Steph Ruler's poetry on navigating ADHD and Sammy's journey into strategic leadership demonstrate how perseverance often underpins professional success. Our commitment to community is equally strong, seen through our local school reading schemes and growing partnership with the Learning in Harmony Trust.

We are deeply grateful to our alumni for sharing their journeys. Your stories inspire our current students and remind them that their world truly is their oyster. Your achievements are the heartbeat of UCSE, and we look forward to celebrating many more in the years ahead.

Nick Smith Careers Coordinator and Editor

Keep in Touch

We love hearing from our alumni! Share your news or say hello - we'd love to feature you. Get in touch via email nick.smith@southessex.ac.uk or follow us on social media.



Student discount

Postgraduate discounts for UCSE Alumni

As a UCSE graduate, you may be entitled to exclusive discounts on postgraduate study through our partner universities, UAL and UEA.

UAL

You may be eligible for a 20% discount on tuition fees when starting or continuing a postgraduate course at UAL.

Scan the QR code to check your eligibility and explore the full range of alumni benefits.



UAL

UEA

UEA offers a 10% alumni tuition fee discount to graduates returning for postgraduate study. This includes alumni from Study Abroad and Exchange programmes.

Follow the QR code for more details and to find out how to apply.

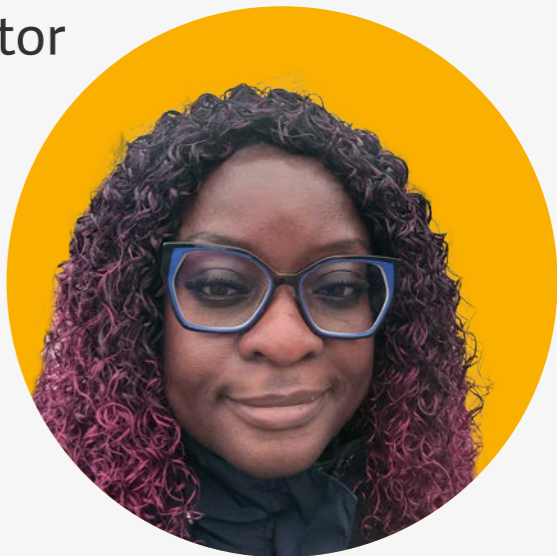


UEA



Reflective leap into the SEND sector

Lilian Onyango



The Growth Mindset:

Three months ago, Lilian Onyango stood on the graduation stage, feeling “on top of the world.” Today, as a recent BA (Hons) Special Educational Needs and Disability Studies (SEND) graduate, she is navigating the daunting, often exhausting reality of the post-grad transition—balancing CVs and job hunts with the lived reality of being a mother to a child with special needs.

Lilian’s academic journey was defined by a delicate work-life-study balance. As a mature student, her resilience was forged through the sheer persistence required to manage time efficiently. “The whole experience made me much more resilient,” she reflects, particularly when tackling the “ultimate test” of her dissertation. Focusing on the intersection of food and sensory needs for autistic learners, she learned that professional success requires more than just theory; it requires the persistence to handle rejection and the boundaries to navigate complex data collection.



“There is a level of complacency in life to maintain the status quo,” she notes, “but ultimately that can become unhelpful to society as a whole.”



Now, looking forward, Lilian sees opportunity in the shifting tides of the sector. Inspired by the “eye-opening” legislative processes she studied, she aims to eventually launch her own company - a move that would provide the professional flexibility she needs while advocating for SEND learners.

Her advice to those still in the “thick of it” is a call to intellectual agility: “Learn, unlearn, and relearn.” For Lilian, the greatest lesson wasn’t found in a textbook, but in the power of a growth mindset. “There is a level of complacency in life to maintain the status quo,” she notes, “but ultimately that can become unhelpful to society as a whole.”

Game Jam success with Best Before

Jake Hall

Jake Hall, a final - year Game Design BSc (Hons) student, recently took part in a university-hosted game jam, creating Best Before - a rogue-like adventure built in just two weeks! The game features procedurally generated dungeons, quirky characters like Cheddar Man and Mozzarella Girl, and a fast-paced combat system inspired by classic titles.

Jake credits his time at university for preparing him to meet the challenge. "Learning industry standards and tools like GitHub helped me manage the project efficiently," he says. The biggest hurdle? Time. "You have to plan, design, and build everything in just a few days. I kept the scope realistic and focused on finishing something polished."

The experience also helped Jake grow his technical skills. He learned how to better organise and manage game data using a tool

called Unity. One feature he explored was "Scriptable Objects," which allowed him to keep track of things like enemy stats and animations in a more efficient way. He also created pixel art and designed sound effects -most of which he recorded himself using a microphone!

Jake's advice to other students is clear: "Think small. Think outside the box. Don't worry about making something amazing- focus on completing something achievable." He's already planning future projects and hopes to refine Best Before with minor updates.

For Jake, game jams aren't just competitions- they're opportunities to grow, experiment, and build a portfolio. "They challenge your abilities and teach you to work within limitations. That's where creativity thrives."

Game Highlights:

Want to give it a try? Click or follow this link to play! itch.io/jam/summers-end-game-jam/rate/3868073



Creativity through adversity

Vladyslava Zabelina



Stay curious. Try new things. Take risks. You are unique - make sure you know it and stay confident.



Vladyslava Zabelina, a recent graduate, has used her creative talents to navigate some of life's toughest challenges. Her work spans both painting and graphic design-two disciplines that have helped her process personal experiences and build a promising career path.

Her painting, created in response to the war in Ukraine and the loss of her home, became a powerful way to reconnect with her passion and share her story. "I turned to painting again, hoping to rediscover my passion and find something to focus on besides those overwhelming emotions," she explains.

At university, Vladyslava discovered a new interest in visual communication, which led to her ISTD award-winning project. This recognition gave her the confidence to pursue design professionally and confirmed she was heading in the right direction. "This project helped me understand that I was on the

right path and made me more confident and ambitious in my goals."

Balancing studies, work, and personal life wasn't easy, but she credits her resilience to staying focused and being surrounded by supportive people. "The most important thing was staying hopeful and not giving up," she says. "I realised that I've become more confident not only in my work and abilities but also in the people around me."

Now exploring career opportunities, Vladyslava is optimistic about the future. Her advice to fellow alumni and current students is simple: "Stay curious. Try new things. Take risks. You are unique - make sure you know it and stay confident."

Her story is a reminder that growth often comes through challenge, and that resilience is built not just through persistence, but through passion, community, and self-belief.

From Early Years to strategic leadership

Sammy Tyler

The Nurturing Path to Senior Management

For Sammy, an Early Years graduate from 2018, the transition from supporting children and families in Social Care to becoming a Senior Employment Advisor for Mental Health Matters might seem like an unexpected leap. Yet, in her role managing a team of five specialist advisors, Sammy proves that the core principles of her degree – structured support, observation, and building resilience – are the most powerful tools for strategic leadership and community Growth.

Sammy's success hinges on viewing her professional environment through a lens of foundational development. Her work is not about short-term fixes; it is about applying the scaffolding principle to empower not just clients, but her entire team. This strategic approach ensures the service contributes directly to the health and economic resilience of the wider Essex community.

The strategy of scaffolding

At the heart of Sammy's leadership is the concept of scaffolding – breaking down skills into manageable steps. This philosophy, learned in Early Years, now dictates her management style.

"Early Years taught me the value of scaffolding, breaking down complex skills into manageable steps with structured support," Sammy explains. "I apply this by guiding my team of five employment advisors through clear frameworks, regular feedback, and tailored mentoring through both supervision and case supervision."

This structured guidance achieves two simultaneous goals: it builds the professional confidence and capability of her advisors, and it ensures that clients receive consistent, high-quality support necessary for sustainable outcomes.

This nurturing insight is uniquely informed by her past. Her time in Social Care taught her that barriers rarely affect an individual in isolation; they often affect the whole family. "This taught me the importance of breaking challenges into small, achievable steps," she says. This understanding allows her team to strategise holistically, viewing employment success as part of a wider family and mental health recovery.

Leading with resilience

Transitioning from a hands-on professional to a strategic manager was, Sammy admits, the "steepest learning curve." She went from being the lead professional managing the team around a family to strategically leading a professional team - a shift requiring immense resilience and self-belief.

"My university experience gave me the confidence to present in front of others, strengthened my belief in my abilities, and helped me recognise the potential I could achieve," she recalls.

Now, fostering resilience is a core metric of her leadership. She actively combats burnout by establishing strong systems: "I hold monthly supervisions and monthly case supervisions to provide structured reflection and guidance, while also maintaining an open line of communication." This proactive support ensures her team has the capacity to sustain the demanding level of support clients require.

Sammy herself overcame a major organisational hurdle, having been instrumental in building the service from scratch alongside a colleague. Her leadership style - responsive, listening to the team, and implementing necessary adjustments - was key to establishing new strategies and strengthening the service to meet evolving client needs.

Community, strategy, and future vision

As a Senior Advisor, Sammy's focus is on collective impact. She rejects the "one-size-fits-all" approach and has embedded the principle of individualised, flexible support within her team's systems. This nurturing philosophy, carried over from her Early Years training, ensures that clients overcoming major setbacks receive guidance tailored to their unique circumstances.

This work generates wide-reaching community benefits. "By supporting clients into sustainable employment, we help reduce social and financial pressures while contributing to a stronger local workforce," she states. This impact is measured not just through employment outcomes, but crucially through the positive feedback clients provide, reflecting the holistic quality of support delivered.

Sammy and her team actively develop strategic networks, collaborating closely with the Job Centre, attending partnership events, and signposting clients to other local organisations. This joined-up approach ensures clients benefit from comprehensive support, enhancing both employment prospects and overall well-being.

Ultimately, Sammy's strategic success - creating sustainable, long-term change for clients - reflects the growth nurtured during her academic career: "My academic experience strengthened my belief in my abilities and potential, which now translates into guiding my team to deliver consistent, high-quality support."

Her core advice to graduates considering a similar leadership path is simple: "Truly believe in yourself and your ability to step into leadership." Sammy's journey proves that the passion for development learned in Early Years is the perfect transferable skill for strategic management and enduring community impact.



Truly believe
in yourself and
your ability
to step into
leadership.



From graduate to entrepreneur: Mastering the value of creative work

Sylak Ravenspine

Every creative professional faces a fundamental question early in their career: how does the non-linear, unpredictable creative process integrate into conventional business structures? The challenge is encapsulated by the notion that the creative mind is a “mobile asset,” with its most valuable component walking out the door every night.

For alumnus Sylak Ravenspine, a graphic design and illustration graduate and founder of Inks of Essex, resolving this tension was not about conformity. It was about developing the resilience to manage external perceptions and define his own highly valuable process.

Sylak, an artist and entrepreneur who earned a First and has since secured an ECC Green Entrepreneurs’ Award for his eco-business, offers a vital guide for alumni on navigating these professional waters. His journey, culminating in his local business that creates artisanal inks using Essex resources, demonstrates that true career development requires understanding and mastering the perceptions that surround the creative process.

His core message is one of self-advocacy. Creatives must develop the necessary resilience to establish their own value, processes, and unique path to growth. The professional friction often stems from a basic mismatch in communication regarding the creative process. To many managers, a designer who appears to be “doing nothing at their desk” is seen as unproductive. For the creative, however, this is often the crucial and necessary phase of quantifying inspiration. This misunderstanding can lead to frustrating questions, including the genuine query of why the final work could not have been produced sooner. Getting to grips with this tension requires creatives to become masters of translating their abstract process into tangible, quantifiable value for stakeholders.

This self-advocacy begins at university. The andragogical approach adopted in creative subjects, where students are often tasked with self-directed projects, is essential for fostering the required independence. The true value of this education is not to condition minds into a regimented way of thinking, but to teach students how to think outside the box and take full ownership of their creative and professional development.

This foundation of self-direction is the essential skill that allows graduates to negotiate and articulate their process within the often rigid demands of the working world. The creative field, while demanding, has historically been a magnet for individuals whose unique perspectives and unconventional thought processes lead to true innovation.

The challenge lies in combating outdated perceptions and implicit bias that sometimes characterise creatives as insecure or rebellious.

Successfully establishing a career requires not only technical excellence but also the resilience to maintain professional integrity when facing managers who may attempt to blame creatives for failures that are, in reality, due to ineffective briefing or poor communication. Creatives must take responsibility for clear outputs while also setting firm and respectful boundaries around their process.

In facing these realities, every creative must decide whether to seek integration within an existing structure or to lead by establishing their own successful context. Sylak notes that the ultimate choice is this: you will likely be engaging with someone who has invested in you because they themselves do not fully understand the creative process.

The most effective act of resilience is to stop focusing on the lack of understanding and instead focus on clear, professional delivery that

makes the value undeniable. Sylak's own trajectory perfectly illustrates the power of creating your own professional environment. Inks of Essex, a contemporary art practice and eco-business, is the practical realisation of his philosophy. Born from a two year research project into the historic connections between the county and ink manufacturing, the company has successfully carved a highly specialised niche.

By grounding his work in exploration and discovery and using locally gathered resources, from carbon-based Lamp Black to traditional Iron Gall Ink, Sylak has established a business where his complex creative process is not questioned, but is the celebrated and indispensable product that drives growth and local connection.

As Sylak Ravenspine continues to expand Inks of Essex, his message to our university community is one of profound empowerment.

The path to professional success is less about finding a perfect employer and more about owning your creative identity. By understanding the professional dynamics you operate in, maintaining an unwavering commitment to professional standards, and creating your own context, whether through a new business or strong self-advocacy, you can transform the creative tension into a powerful and resilient engine for career development.

Sylak Ravenspine is a resident artist at theblokhouse studios in Southend. He was awarded by ECC's Green Entrepreneurs for his eco business concept, Inks of Essex. He regularly runs workshops at Focal Point Gallery and took part in Creative Estuary's 2025 co-commissions with Pocket Worlds. Sylak is also an alumnus of UCSE, graduating in 2023 with a First in BA (Hons) Illustration and Graphic Design.

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The path to professional success is less about finding a perfect employer and more about owning your creative identity.

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Terminal Tomorrow: The art of shifting perspectives

Hannah Wilkins

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If I'm creating work that feels true to me, that's success.

”



The moment you step into the Launchpad innovation centre in Southend, your view is challenged. On one side, Fine Art graduate Hannah Wilkins' spectacular £5,000 commission, Terminal Tomorrow, depicts two hands reaching across a divide – one human, one robotic. Walk a few steps, and the image snaps into a futuristic aircraft, morphing into a vision of sustainability. This piece is an agamograph, a kinetic artwork that reveals a different image from every angle.

For the 23-year-old Rayleigh artist, this commission is more than just a large-scale installation; it's a physical monument to her own journey of growth. Hannah, who secured the major commission for Southend's Airport Business Park while working an IT job, built this success by doing exactly what her artwork demands: shifting her perspective and refusing to stay in one lane. This is her first professional commission, and it success is a powerful testament to the resilience and proactivity required for a career in the arts today.

Hannah's journey from graduate to commissioned artist was propelled not by waiting for luck, but by relentless searching. She shares a core piece of advice for current students: stop waiting for opportunities to land in your lap. Her process is systematic and thorough. It starts simply by searching "commissions near me," but quickly escalates to deep, ethical research. She delves into a company's values and ethos – what is the building made of, what themes does the organisation embody? "You have to align your values with the company, otherwise you won't be genuinely enthusiastic," she notes. Her own interest in sustainability was key to connecting with Launchpad's ethos. This meticulous approach extends to her professional presentation, ensuring her artist's CV, website, and social media all align with her overarching narrative.

This professional discipline was built in tandem with the local creative community. A connection forged through theblokhouse studio – an initiative supported by the University Centre South Essex – provided the crucial network. The studios offered artistic community, resources, and the support needed to make application processes less daunting. For Hannah, this community became the essential launchpad for her Career Development.

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Adaptability, not perfection, is the real post grad super power.

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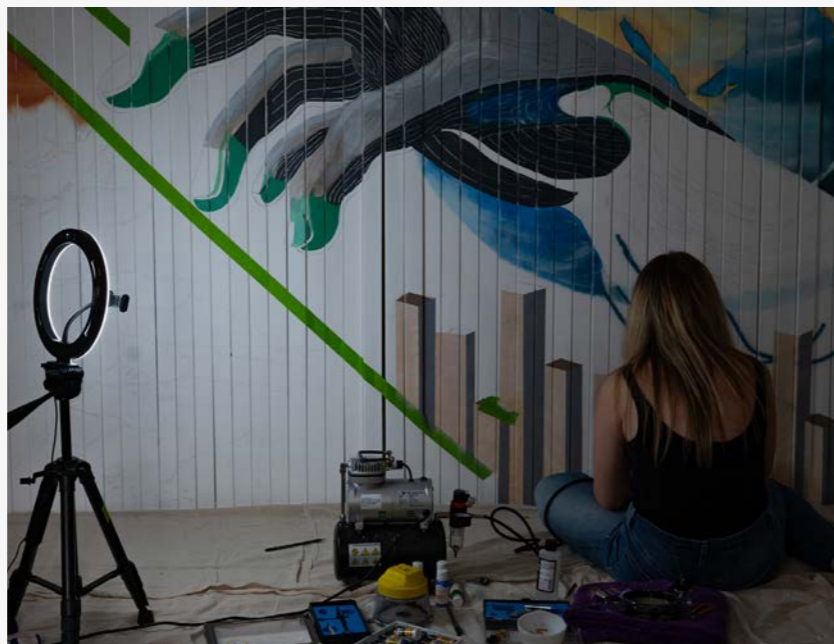
Terminal Tomorrow is an enormous technical achievement. The kinetic agamograph required the artist to translate an abstract concept into a structurally sound, large-scale reality. Hannah admits the construction phase – built, she jokes, from her nan's garage – was a major leap. "I stressed out a lot of people trying to build the structure," she laughs.

Working with a complex structure and being entrusted with a significant budget and space was a surreal experience. Even with extensive research, the physical challenges were formidable, prompting her to make a constant, practical decisions, right down to selecting sustainable wood. Yet, the final results – a thought-provoking piece that captures the spirit of collaboration, innovation, and sustainability – perfectly met the client's high expectations, securing her permanent display in a "future-facing building."

The resilience defining Hannah's journey isn't just about technical skill; it's about conquering self-doubt and redefining personal limits. She recalls being a shy child, but states that entering university solidified her principle of "walking into the unknown" and putting her hand up more. This proactive mindset is one of her core message for fellow graduates: stop staying in "one lane."

This determination is still evident today. Even as she enjoys the “buzz” of the unveiling (and creates content for her thriving social media channels to keep the momentum), she remains humble, hesitant even to call herself an artist. She is already looking ahead, applying for a significant BBC commission focusing on journalists who have lost their lives on the frontline – a project that continues her theme of seeking meaning, purpose-driven work.

For Hannah, Career Development modules at university proved invaluable, providing the structure needed to apply a creative outlook to the professional work. She advises graduates to take these skills seriously to manage the “whiplash” of entering the corporate world. Her advice for maintaining creative stamina is simple: take care of yourself, stick with what you enjoy, and keep the creative juices flowing by picking up a sketch pad ever day. This mirrors her approach to tattooing (a side interest), where she learned to only create pieces for her portfolio that she genuinely wants to draw – a final, unifying lesson for all creative professionals: invest your time in opportunities you are truly invested in. By aligning passion with process, Hannah Wilkins has secured her place on the wall and demonstrated how a graduate’s unique perspective can be the most valuable asset.



From screenplays to
self-discovery:
Upskilling mid-career

Pat Higgins



Your greatest resource is yourself. Be professional, reliable, and kind. Build strong teams and bring your unique perspective, no AI can replicate that.



What drives a seasoned screenwriter, director, and educator to pursue a Masters degree after 16 years in the industry? For Pat Higgins, Programme Lead for Film and TV, it was about pushing creative boundaries and setting an example.

"I chose a Masters in Screenwriting by research," Higgins explains, "because it fit better with my role. I knew how demanding it would be-my wife had completed a Master's before me, so I went in with my eyes open."

His decision wasn't just personal-it was professional. "As Programme Lead, I felt it was important to hold a Masters myself. It also allowed me to reflect on my own process in a way I hadn't done before."

Balancing work and study wasn't easy, but Higgins approached it like any commission. "I applied the same discipline I use in industry-deadlines, page targets, structured rewrites. Writing about my rewrite process forced me to articulate it clearly, which has helped me as a teacher."

Resilience, he says, is key in both academia and film. "Reviews, good or bad, come regardless, and not always fairly. One year at a festival, I read my worst reviews aloud with party hats and music. It was cathartic."

His Master's also deepened his teaching. "It forced me to examine my own methods, not just quote screenwriting authorities. That reflection made my teaching more personal and practical."

On technology, Higgins is pragmatic. "When I started, digital filmmaking was rare. Now, anyone with a smartphone can make a film. I tell students to follow senior industry figures on LinkedIn-see what Netflix or Amazon execs are excited about."

As for AI? "It's complicated. I don't believe AI can truly replicate human emotion in storytelling, at least not yet. But if it helps remove financial barriers, we might hear from new voices who wouldn't have had a chance otherwise."

His advice to students entering a fast-changing industry: "Your greatest resource is yourself. Be professional, reliable, and kind. Build strong teams and bring your unique perspective, no AI can replicate that."

And for anyone thinking about their next step-whether in education, career, or creativity? "Never give up. Think about what you'd do if money wasn't an issue-then work out how to get paid to do that."

Pat's three keys to success:

Never overlook an opportunity to learn

Be nice to everyone you meet

Never, ever give up

Nurturing the future of teaching

Jennifer Muttock

For Jennifer Muttock, the classroom was never just a place to teach – it was a laboratory for understanding how humans grow. A graduate of the Early Years degree at University Centre South Essex (UCSE), Jennifer has spent over a decade translating the nuances of child development into a powerhouse career in educational leadership. Today, as a Trust-wide leader for the Learning in Harmony Trust and a Visiting Fellow for Ambition Institute, she has traded direct control of a single classroom for a much larger mission: nurturing the educators who will shape the next generation.

Scaling the Knowledge: From Child to System

The transition from a single classroom to a multi-site Trust role required a fundamental shift in perspective. "My biggest adjustment was moving from direct control to indirect influence," Jennifer explains. "I moved from 'I can fix this' to 'I must enable others to fix this.'"

This evolution is where Jennifer's Early Years expertise becomes a strategic asset. While others might look at school data through a purely administrative lens, Jennifer applies her "Early Years lens" to spot patterns that others might miss. Whether it's identifying delayed communication and language acquisition or uneven self-regulation across schools, her developmental background informs every strategic decision.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, she ensures that the curriculum is rooted in how children actually learn. "My role is to bridge the gap between teachers knowing what to do and how to do it in their classrooms," she says. This involves breaking down complex developmental theory into practical, observable teaching actions – a process she describes as "scaffolding" for adults.

The Unexpected Tool: The Power of Observation

Perhaps the most surprising carry-over from her UCSE degree is the use of observation as an assessment tool. In Early Years, practitioners are trained to watch children closely to understand their thinking before intervening. Jennifer has found this skill to be transformative when mentoring trainee teachers.

"I notice how teachers respond, not just what they say," Jennifer notes. "I pick up on their confidence, hesitation, misconceptions, or resistance, and I adapt my input in the moment." This "responsive teaching" for adults ensures that professional development isn't just a lecture – it's a living, breathing process that builds teacher confidence.

Cultivating Resilience Through Safety

In an era where the teaching profession faces immense pressure, Jennifer views Resilience through the lens of psychological safety. She recognises that regardless of age, people thrive when they feel valued and supported. By creating "nurturing environments" for staff, she enables teachers to sustain their wellbeing and continue to grow professionally even in high-pressure settings.

This relational approach is key when navigating organisational change. "Adults also need time, repetition, and reassurance to embed new practice," Jennifer observes. By prioritising trust and shared understanding, she has guided schools through significant policy shifts and expansions, ensuring that change is embraced rather than feared.

A Legacy of Belief in Southend

Jennifer's work has a direct ripple effect on the Community of Southend. By facilitating collaboration across the Learning in Harmony Trust and supporting career-changers and parents entering the profession, she is strengthening the local teaching force.

Her advice to current UCSE students is a reflection of her own journey: "Focus on understanding how your work fits into wider trust systems. Always put the children's needs at the centre, and keep asking for feedback."

For Jennifer, the lecturers at UCSE saw her potential as a leader before she saw it herself. Today, she is fulfilling that potential by ensuring that every child in every setting has access to high-quality, developmentally informed teaching. Her career is a testament to the fact that an Early Years degree doesn't just prepare you for the classroom – it prepares you to lead the entire educational landscape.



My biggest adjustment was moving from direct control to indirect influence," Jennifer explains. "I moved from 'I can fix this' to 'I must enable others to fix this.'"



Managing director - sixredsquares

Owen Williams



6rs.

Walking into the offices of sixredsquares, it is immediately clear why their design agency has flourished for 20 years. We were not just granted an interview with co-founder Owen Williams; we were welcomed with a cup of tea and a sense of easy, creative energy. It is a genuine, human-first approach that defines both their award-winning work and their deep commitment to the community right here in our city, a testament to how a bond forged over university beers can grow into a resilient, globally minded business and a true success story for our alumni.

The genesis of sixredsquares came in their second year of university, when the founders transformed a simple professional development brief into a fully functional “quasi-business,” a feat that required a “steep learning curve” in legalities and networking. This early, proactive initiative laid the foundation for an agency that values soft skills like communication and empathy as much as technical prowess. We explore how this unique approach has allowed the firm, now in its 20th year, to achieve significant growth and become a pillar of resilience in the local creative scene.

That spirit of initiative, which began with challenging a brief, immediately set sixredsquares on a path of rapid growth. Owen explains that the crucial early lesson was not just technical skill, it was learning the business fundamentals that most creatives avoid. “It is really important to be able to discern between a good opportunity and one that is not going to be any good,” he notes. “This requires truly understanding creative industries and specialism more specifically, which will help to put you in front of others.” This early dive into legalities and business development transformed the founders from students into nascent entrepreneurs, setting them apart in the competitive creative landscape.

The foundation they built was not just on business acumen; it was on soft skills. As students, they deliberately avoided siloing themselves, speaking to a whole host of other students and businesses, which Owen says “opened up a lot of conversations and opportunities.” This focus on communication and empathy became their trademark, allowing them to truly understand client needs and seek the human story in large corporations and organisations. This human-centric, holistic approach would prove vital, becoming the bedrock of their resilience as they navigated two decades of economic change and industry challenges.

Twenty years in business is a significant milestone, and resilience is the prominent word required to achieve it, especially in the current climate. sixredsquares has certainly weathered its ups and downs. When asked how they sustain that longevity, Owen offers practical, candid advice for any entrepreneur: “Trusting in your own abilities,” “put in place the right team,” and “making sure that you are getting paid in time.” He emphasises that while a creative might focus only on the output, success requires getting all practical things right.

Beyond the financials, creative professionals must also build resilience against constant criticism. Owen stresses the mental fortitude required: “Be prepared for

your work to be constant subject of critique. Be prepared to take rejection.” The agency’s solution has been to remain “self-assured,” focusing on originality and maintaining a strong, collaborative team. This confident, holistic approach to design has allowed them to consistently attract large, high-impact clients, proving that their commitment to originality and community is a sustainable business model.



Be prepared for your work to be constant subject of critique. Be prepared to take rejection.



SIX RED SQUARES



For sixredsquares, true growth is not measured solely by revenue, but by the positive impact they generate. This dedication to local community causes was not an afterthought; it is baked into their business model. They purposefully work with complementary organisations and charities, driven by a passion “for the better good.” This relationship-focused approach, which eschews corporate hierarchy, is how they ensure they always talk to people and not at them.

The agency’s portfolio reflects this mission, seeking out the human story in every client. Their involvement with projects like the She Leads initiative for the West Ham female football team, or developing brands for local charities and organisations like Waddle on Sea and Essex County Council, highlights a commitment to advancing good causes. They do not just design; they create emotional connections that resonate deeply with the community.

For example, in their work with Brook, a sexual health charity, sixredsquares ensured the website redesign was rooted in the community it served, actively gathering feedback from service users. This collaborative process guaranteed that the final design was not just appealing, but highly accessible and relatable, placing the user’s voice at the absolute centre of the project.

While deeply rooted in the local community, their approach has also unlocked major corporate partnerships. Owen points to their work developing a new brand for the Advantage travel partnership, a global multinational, as a key example of their ability to scale. This experience demonstrated that their human-centric model works at



any size, often by enhancing the autonomy of internal teams rather than dominating them. By handing over robust assets, sixredsquares empowers these large organisations to use their brands effectively, a testament to their collaborative, rather than hierarchical, ethos.

Twenty years brings seismic shifts in technology, requiring constant adaptation. While celebrating the exposure social media offers to different disciplines and groups, Owen raises a caution familiar to the digital age: the ease of producing content has never been greater, but this accessibility risks reducing the quality of design projects. This focus on originality over regurgitation is where sixredsquares differentiates itself, refusing the age of templates mentioned on their site and reinforcing the need for their clients' work to stand out.



What is the most important message for today's students who see a successful business like this and aspire to entrepreneurship? According to Owen, it is simple: Proactivity. "It is vital to be proactive, look for opportunities, be resilient, contact people," he states emphatically. This means going beyond academic achievements and taking genuine initiative. "Companies respect professionals who take initiative... Go knocking on doors, show initiative and don't just focus on your technical skills."

The success of sixredsquares, a firm where the co-founders all had different specialisms, was always about collaboration and balance. Owen's strongest advice to job-seekers underscores this: "Someone is more likely to employ you if you have a good balance of soft and hard skills." He finishes the thought with a challenge to young creatives: "Get over yourself." The most successful people, he observes, are those who consistently seek opportunities, rather than waiting for them to arrive.

As an honorary alumnus success story, sixredsquares continues to reinforce these lessons in practice, actively taking on new graduates and encouraging them to get out of one's lane to incorporate new ideas. Looking to the future, Owen believes the university and local authority approach to creativity is vital, expressing concern that the arts are currently being "squeezed out of a collective conscious." The potential

for talented individuals is enormous, but creativity needs to be consistently brought into the spotlight more.

Twenty years ago, a beer, a shared idea, and a mutual desire to challenge the status quo launched a local company that would go on to define its sector. sixredsquares has not just endured; it has excelled by prioritising the human element at every turn, from its friendly office door to its community projects and major corporate campaigns. Their journey is a powerful reminder that resilience and growth are the result of conscious choices: to value empathy, to relentlessly seek opportunity, and to never stop championing the good of the community that helped build you.

As Owen and the sixredsquares team continue to grow, their success provides our university community, students, staff, and alumni, with a clear message: authenticity and initiative will always cut through the noise.



It is vital to be proactive, look for opportunities.



Costume careers:

Ten years with the Royal Ballet & Opera

For ten years, the collaboration between University Centre South Essex (UCSE) and the Royal Ballet & Opera (RBO) has been nothing short of extraordinary. This isn't just an institutional link; it's a rigorous, hands-on degree programme that acts as a direct conduit, launching graduates straight into one of the world's most prestigious stages. The BA (Hons) Costume Construction degree ensures that students aren't just studying the craft – they are preparing for a seamless transition into the professional workroom.

A Degree Rooted in Real Practice

Underpinning this unique degree is its physical home. Students don't learn from afar; they are based in a dedicated studio within the Bob and Tamar Manoukian Costume Centre at Purfleet. This is no ordinary classroom. It's a custom-built facility housing a working costume workroom and an extensive three-floor Costume Store brimming with some of the most beautiful and historically significant garments in theatre. Programme Lead Emma Bowers is passionate about this exclusive access, stressing that students aren't just looking at history; they are conducting real research into historical and contemporary pattern cutting, right next to the masterpieces they study.

This commitment to practical application is woven into the curriculum year-by-year. The rigorous underpinning of the degree ensures that professional exposure isn't accidental – it's strategically integrated from the start. First-year students immediately gain a sense of the scale, beginning with an in-depth backstage tour of the RBO and a technical dye workshop delivered by an expert from the Royal Ballet and Opera (RBO) team. This exposure guarantees they grasp the high-stakes culture and technical brilliance required for success. By their second year, the focus shifts to application: students take

on work placements within the costume departments and delve into vital preservation skills during a dedicated unit with the RBO Collections team.

From Studio to Stage

All of this rigorous, on-site training culminates in the most defining moment of the decade-long partnership: the annual RBO prize. Emma Bowers recalls the overwhelming atmosphere of the very first ceremony held in the Linbury Theatre foyer: "Seeing the students come down the stairs and see their work on display is very special." This annual event has become the exhilarating pinnacle of the academic year.

This final-year competition, where students design and construct a costume for a character from a selected production, demands immense technical skill and creative vision. Exhibiting their final pieces right inside the RBO gives them a moment of profound professional validation. This is where student ambition meets industry standard, propelling graduates like recent winners Jack Day and Lucy Simpson towards the next stage of their careers.



The Thread of Resilience

The professional validation students experience in the Linbury is not an isolated moment - it reflects the standards they have been working towards throughout the degree.

The Royal Ballet and Opera Prize stands as a clear point of transition between training and career, and alumna Sophie Sims' journey offers a strong example of how that transition can take shape.

Emma Bowers describes Sophie as a highly determined student who "worked very hard to fulfil her potential." Her entry into the RBO began in the Revivals department, where pace and adaptability are fundamental to the work. From there, she moved into the Stockroom, assisting the Manager and gaining broader responsibility within the organisation. This progression was later followed by her appointment as Assistant Costume Performance Manager (CPM), a supervisory role that places her at the centre of production delivery.

Sophie's route from graduate to CPM reflects more than individual achievement. It demonstrates how the partnership develops not only technical confidence, but the professional judgement and resilience required to sustain a career within a world-leading creative institution.

Beyond the Degree

What Sophie's career makes visible on an individual level, the partnership now supports at scale. The Royal Ballet and Opera's decision to work with UCSE as the education provider for its Costume Construction degree programme extends the collaboration beyond undergraduate training and into the earliest stages of professional employment.

This evolving relationship is maintained through regular exchange between practitioners and educators, allowing each to remain responsive to the pressures, technologies, and working practices shaping contemporary costume production. Graduates enter the industry not as observers, but as contributors.

A decade into the partnership, its impact is no longer confined to a single programme. It sits within the wider ecology of the creative industries - feeding into theatres, opera houses, and production environments where resilience, collaboration, and precision are essential.



Bringing fan animation to life

Edward Mortimer

University Centre South Essex student Edward Mortimer joined an online fan animation project retelling the 2008 Bionicle storyline - something he'd hoped to see for years. When the opportunity arose, he jumped in. "I wanted to help create something I love," he says.

Collaborating with fellow fans has been a highlight. "It's uplifting to work with people who share the same passion," Edward shares. The project connected him with a wide network of creatives - voice actors, animators, 3D modellers - opening doors for future collaborations.

Edward's role focuses on keying, a technical task involving green screen editing. "I didn't know much about keying when I started, but I've learned a lot through hands-on experience," he says. His advice to others? "Don't be afraid to join a project in an area you're not strong in. It's a great way to learn on the job."

The project has also taught him the value of diverse perspectives. "Differing opinions

and skill sets are what make a project tick. They bring new ideas and help make the final product feel complete."

Seeing the team's dedication keeps Edward motivated. "Everyone's working hard, and that inspires me to do my part. I want to help make the project the best it can be."



It's uplifting to work with people who share the same passion.



Edward's story is a great example of how passion projects can lead to real growth - both creatively and professionally.

Driving change:
How design
humanises the
automotive world

Jessica Bernard



For many, automotive technology suggests engineers and mechanics, but for Jessica Bernard, a 2022 Graphic Design and Illustration graduate, it became the backdrop for her biggest achievement. Recently honoured with Autocar's Drivers of Change: New Talent award, she has helped modernise the industry's visual identity at Keyloop, making complex technology feel human, inclusive and accessible. Her win highlights how creativity is now a strategic force in technical sectors, especially for someone "typically underrepresented in the industry."

Jessica's role focuses on clarity and communication: "Essentially, I translate complex ideas and technology into clear, compelling designs that engage people, foster trust, and make the automotive sector feel modern." The

Autocar recognition is a milestone she values deeply. "Being recognised on that level, especially as someone who entered the industry from a non-traditional route, is something I'll always see as a defining moment in my journey."

Her journey was shaped by her time at University Centre South Essex, chosen for its hands-on, individual-focused approach. The practical course structure "mirrored real industry workflows," helping her learn to take briefs, manage deadlines and present professionally. The supportive environment also strengthened her confidence, extending into hobbies like illustration and photography, reminders that "creativity isn't just a job; it's something that's part of who I am."

Jessica's favourite memory is the creative community's

freedom and encouragement. "It was the first place where I truly felt like a designer, and that feeling has stayed with me ever since." That foundation helped her transition into her cross-functional role at Keyloop, where she now leads creative vision across major initiatives and collaborates with Sales, Product, HR and Leadership.

Calling higher education "the chance to discover your potential," Jessica believes it builds the skills, curiosity and confidence needed for meaningful careers. Her experience shows that graphic design is not limited to traditional agencies. With resilience and strategic thinking, graduates can become true Drivers of Change in any industry.



Don't be afraid to join a project in an area you're not strong in. It's a great way to learn on the job.



The rhythm of understanding: Rhyming through the noise of ADHD

Steph Ruler

For many, poetry is a performance; for Steph Ruler, it became a lifeline. The 20-year-old Early Years Care and Education student at University Centre South Essex (UCSE) never set out to be a writer. Yet, lying in bed one night, the racing thoughts typical of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) began to form a pattern. A few sentences became a rhyme; a rhyme became a poem; and eventually, forty poems became a collection titled *My ADHD Mind*.

For Steph, these verses are more than just words on a page – they are a rhythmic map of the resilience required to navigate life, study, and work with a neurodiverse brain. "It just felt so nice expressing myself in a way that I've never been able to do," Steph reflects. "Then getting it out and having people in my class understand and see themselves in it as well."

From Being Ignored to Being Heard

The journey to this collection was paved with significant challenges. Before arriving at the University Centre, Steph's academic experience was defined by a lack of support. Despite her own efforts to seek help, she left school without a diagnosis for either dyslexia or ADHD. "I tried to seek help at school, but no one listened," she explains. "I got ignored by several people."

This experience of being "silenced" is common among neurodiverse students, but Steph's story took a definitive turn when she met her tutor, Maria Cruickshank. At UCSE, the culture of community and belonging ensured that when Steph raised her concerns, they were met with action rather than apathy. Maria helped Steph secure the formal support she needed – a turning point that Steph credits with pushing her "so far forward."

With the right scaffolding in place, the academic hurdles that once seemed insurmountable began to clear. Despite the difficulties with focus and assignment

deadlines that ADHD can present, Steph recently achieved a milestone that she describes as "mad": turning in all her assignments on time. It is a powerful example of how growth is unlocked when the environment is adapted to the individual, rather than forcing the individual to fit a rigid mould.

From Verse to the Preschool Floor

Steph's development isn't confined to her poetry or her essays. Her journey has a direct, professional application in her current role at a local preschool – a position she secured through her course placement. Her experience with ADHD gives her a unique, empathetic perspective as an Early Years practitioner, allowing her to understand the diverse ways in which young children process the world around them.

Tutor Maria Cruickshank notes that Steph's progress has been remarkable. "I am extremely proud of Steph and all that she has achieved," Maria says. "She has developed at an amazing pace... I hope her poetry will raise awareness and help others."

Don't give up if one thing doesn't work out.

For Steph, the poetry serves a dual purpose: it is cathartic for her and educational for the community. By sharing her internal world, she is actively dismantling the stereotypes that often plague those with ADHD. "It's hard when you feel like you're the only one with it.

It makes you feel like you're wrong," she says. "There are so many stereotypes that go with it, and that's so wrong – that needs to change."

Finding What Works: A Message of Persistence

Steph's advice to fellow students and alumni navigating similar paths is rooted in the resilience she has cultivated. She emphasises that "everyone is different" and that finding the right coping mechanisms is a process of trial and error. Whether it is using a "fidget" to maintain focus or surrounding yourself with a supportive network of "the right people," the key is persistence.

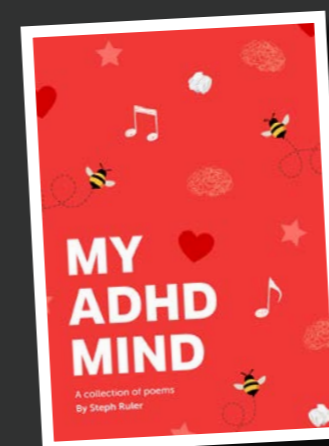
"It's hard. Try different things and find what works for you," she urges. "Don't give up if one thing doesn't work out."

Through *My ADHD Mind*, Steph Ruler has done more than just complete a degree project; she has found her voice. Her story is a reminder that neurodiversity is not a deficit to be cured, but a perspective to be understood. As she continues her career in Early Years, she carries with her the rhythm of her own resilience, ensuring that the children in her care are listened to, understood, and encouraged to find their own unique rhymes.

It just felt so nice expressing myself in a way that I've never been able to do.

My ADHD Mind

Scan the QR code to read Steph's poem.



Continue your

Career Journey with UCSE

The transition from student to alumnus is a major period of Growth. Whether you are looking to make a career pivot or secure your first professional role, the UCSE HE Careers & Employability Service is here to support you.

We offer friendly, professional one-to-one support and tailored workshops exclusively for University Centre South Essex graduates.

How We Can Help

If you graduated from UCSE within the last two years, we can provide expert guidance on:

- **Career Searching:** Finding the right path for your degree.
- **Applications & CVs:** Creating documents that get you noticed.
- **Interview Prep:** Mock interviews and confidence-building techniques.
- **Postgraduate Study:** Support with your Master's applications.

If you are interested in contributing to our student wellbeing groups, please get in touch using the details below. Your experience could make a real difference to our students.



Our service provides all the advice and resources you need to develop key employability skills and access vital career information.



Get in Touch

Stay connected with your Community and take the next steps in your professional life.

Email: HECareers@southessex.ac.uk
Instagram: @UCSEcareers

Get involved with our

Student Collective Groups

We are launching a new series of wellbeing groups to support different student communities across the University.

We would love to hear from alumni who would like to get involved. This could include:

- Hosting a practical workshop to share a skill, talent or business idea
- Running an activity session with students
- Sharing your personal experiences, for example as a parent who has graduated, to inspire and support others

If you are interested in contributing to our student wellbeing groups, please get in touch using the details below. Your experience could make a real difference to our students.



UCSE Wellbeing Contacts:

HEsupport@southessex.ac.uk
Instagram: UCSE_Wellbeing

External Contacts And Resources:

Samaritans - Call 116 123 (24 Hours, 365 Days A Year)

Samaritans is there for anyone who wants to talk. You can also email: jo@samaritans.org for a reply within 24 hours

Mind Support Line - Call 0300 102 1234 (9am-6pm Monday-Friday)

This is a safe space for you to talk about your mental health. Our advisors are trained to listen to you and help you find specialist support if you need it.

SHOUT- Text Shout To 85258 (24 Hours)

Shout offers a confidential 24/7 text service providing support if you are in crisis and need immediate help email: jo@samaritans.org for a reply within 24 hours.

NHS Urgent Mental Health Helpline - Call 111 Option 2 (24 Hours)

You can contact NHS 111 any time to access support for your health. To get urgent mental health support, call 111 and select option 2.

Stay connected

We'd love to hear from you

As a valued member of our UCSE alumni community, your journey with us doesn't end at graduation.

We're always keen to hear from our alumni. Whether you'd like to:

- Deliver a workshop or guest talk
- Become a mentor for current students
- Join a focus group to help shape our alumni offering
- Attend future events and networking opportunities
- Share ideas or feedback to improve the alumni experience

Get in touch at:

HECareers@southessex.ac.uk

Let's stay connected and continue building a strong, supportive alumni network - together.





RESILIENCE AND
PERSONAL GROWTH

CAREER INSIGHTS

