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brings fresh
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ALUMNI MAGAZINE

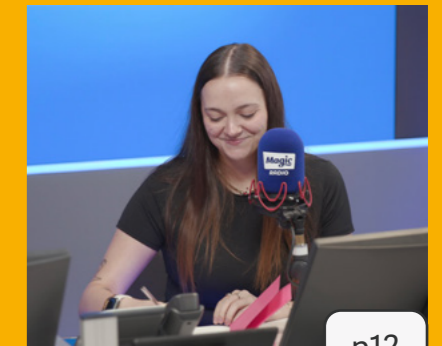
ISSUE 02: Wellbeing, Balance & Personal
Success, linking with Resourcefulness



UCSE | UNIVERSITY CENTRE
SOUTH ESSEX
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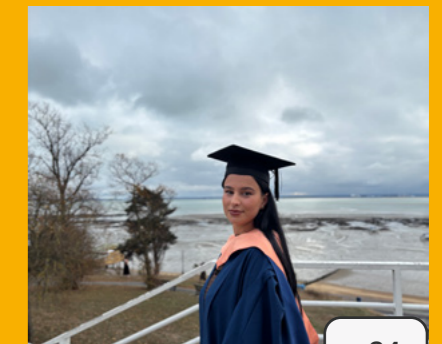
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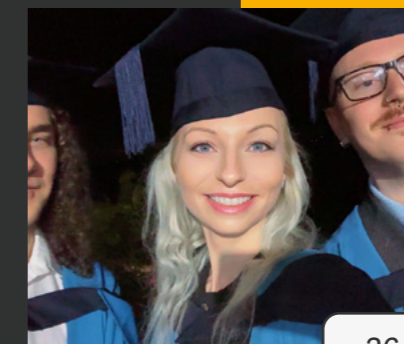
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Foreword **Sharon Dunphy**

Welcome to the second edition of the UCSE Alumni Magazine.

It is with great pride that we bring together another collection of stories that celebrate the remarkable achievements, resilience, and continued growth of our alumni community.

This edition shines a spotlight on the journeys, creativity, and impact of graduates whose experiences continue to reflect the values at the heart of University Centre South Essex: Resilience, Growth, and Community. Our alumni continue to inspire us through the many different paths they have taken since leaving UCSE. From innovative artistic practice and award-winning technological advancements to leadership, advocacy, and community engagement, this magazine highlights how a UCSE education can serve as a foundation for ambition, creativity, and meaningful change.

Within these pages, we celebrate not only professional success, but also the determination and perseverance that often shape these achievements. Stories of overcoming challenges, embracing opportunity, and turning passion into purpose remind us that growth is rarely linear it is built through resilience, adaptability, and courage. Equally important is the strength of our UCSE community. Whether through partnerships that enrich learning, outreach projects that support the next generation, or alumni who continue to give back through mentoring

and collaboration, this sense of connection remains one of our greatest strengths.

Our alumni network continues to grow, demonstrating that the UCSE journey extends far beyond graduation. To every graduate who has shared their story in this edition, thank you. Your experiences inspire our current students, strengthen our community, and reflect the lasting impact of higher education. You remain an important part of UCSE's story, and your achievements continue to inspire and shape the future of our community.

As we celebrate this second edition, we look forward with excitement to the future continuing to recognise achievements, foster connections, and champion the extraordinary journeys of our alumni.

Thank you for being part of our community.

Sharon Dunphy, Deputy Executive Director - HE and Quality

Editor's Note **Nick Smith**

Welcome to the second edition of the UCSE Alumni Magazine. Our objective with this publication is to provide a platform for our alumni and current students to share their professional experiences and the strategies they employ to manage the demands of their careers.

This edition emphasises the theme of resourcefulness. The featured stories – ranging from those addressing systemic social challenges to those building independent creative practices – illustrate the practical application of this skill in diverse professional environments. We are pleased to feature a significant number of contributors from the Early Years Care and Education department. Programme Lead Maria Cruickshank notes that



the success of these students is grounded in structured reflection, which supports the transition from academic study to the labour market. By focusing on self-awareness and personal goal-setting, our students are better prepared to manage the complexities of their chosen sectors.

We thank all contributors for providing these insights. Highlighting these varied career paths is central to our mission to support our community and provide current students with realistic examples of professional life. We encourage you to engage with these accounts and share your own updates with us. Your experiences continue to provide valuable context for the evolution of our programmes and the success of the UCSE community.

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



Designing a Life Beyond the Screen: Jamal Uddin

In an era where Artificial Intelligence can generate a complex illustration in seconds and digital screens follow us from our desks to our very refrigerators, what does it mean to be a "successful" creative? For Jamal Uddin, a BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration graduate, the answer isn't found in a viral post or a high-tech software suite. Instead, it lies in the strength of a handshake, the clarity of a fresh-air walk, and the quiet realisation that a degree is not a final destination, but a sturdy foundation for an unpredictable world.

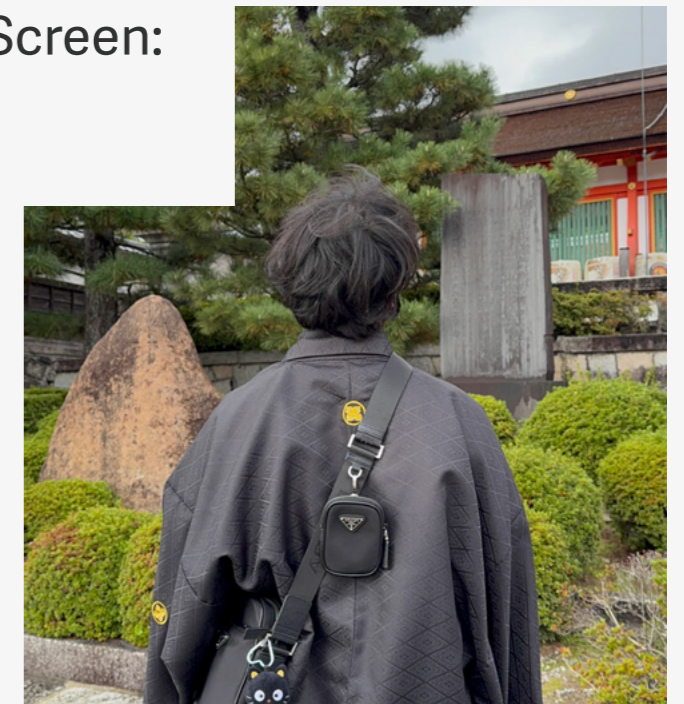
The Anatomy of an Unconventional Pivot

The transition from a final degree show to the professional world is rarely a straight line. For Jamal, this "uphill climb" of technology meant looking back towards the power of human connection. While the industry fixates on the latest digital trends, Jamal discovered that "digital fatigue" was creating a unique opening for those willing to step out from behind the monitor.

Recognising that a degree alone is often just the beginning, Jamal leaned into developing his communication skills, leading to a surprising but vital role as an admin assistant for a maintenance company. Far from leaving his design roots behind, he found ways to apply his visual toolkit to physical maintenance tasks, proving that the creative mind is most valuable when it is flexible. "Having just a degree does not cut it anymore," Jamal reflects. "Learning additional skills gives you the flexibility to look at other paths if the future becomes unpredictable."

Fighting the 'Always-On' Culture

For a designer, the "always-on" nature of the digital world can quickly lead to a creative drought. Jamal's approach to wellbeing and balance is refreshingly analogue. In an industry that demands constant output, he has established firm "non-negotiables" to protect his mental space.



"Everywhere you go, a screen is present," he says. To combat this, Jamal treats the outdoors as a necessary reset button. By turning off mobile data and stepping away from notifications, he allows himself the "breath of fresh air" required to stay grounded. Whether it's spending time with family or simply enjoying the world without a lens, Jamal understands that to support a creative career, one must first support the "whole person" behind the desk.

Worth Over Wealth

Perhaps Jamal's most poignant insight is his shifting definition of personal success. In a field often obsessed with big-name clients, he has pivoted his focus inward. For him, success isn't a collection of possessions; it is a state of contentment and self-worth.

"Yourself is the most important person in your life," he notes. His advice to current students facing the intimidating rise of AI is grounded in this self-belief. While he acknowledges that AI poses ethical questions and risks to traditional roles, he sees it as a challenge to be met with curiosity rather than fear. He views his studies at UCSE as the "foundation" that allows him to branch out into areas AI cannot replicate – the deeply human aspects of empathy, ethics, and adaptability.

Jamal's story reminds us that being "lost" is simply a part of the design process. By knowing your worth and staying resilient in the face of change, success becomes less about where you are, and more about the person you are becoming.

Beyond the Blackboard: Danny Healey

For many, the path to a career in education is a straight line from school to university to the classroom. But for Danny Healey, a recent BA (Hons) Early Years Care and Education graduate, the journey was forged through a series of bold pivots, a decade in retail, and a hard-won resilience that no textbook can fully teach. Today, Danny is navigating the intensive world of a School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programme – a vital local initiative bridging the gap between academic theory and the front lines of Essex primary schools. His story is a powerful testament to our theme of Wellbeing, Balance, and Personal Success, proving that a “meaningful life” is often built on the courage to start again.

The Pivot of a Lifetime

Five years ago, Danny was a supervisor in the retail sector. He had a stable job, but he also had a deadline: he didn’t want to be in that industry by the time he turned forty. “I decided to tap into my authentic voice,” Danny reflects. It was a moment of profound resourcefulness. Drawing on his earlier experiences in PE and a latent passion for supporting young people, he embarked on a journey that would include a one-year Access course, a three-year degree at University Centre South Essex (UCSE), and finally, his current SCITT placement.

This transition was far from easy. Danny achieved his degree while holding down two jobs and drawing on a personal history that included periods of homelessness. This “whole person” perspective – the grit, the work ethic, and the refusal to be defined by his circumstances – is what Danny now brings to the classroom. It wasn’t just about gaining a qualification; it was about the self-discovery required to transform from a retail supervisor into an educator.

Bridging Theory and Practice: The SCITT Initiative

Currently immersed in his teacher training, Danny is a prime example of how UCSE graduates are feeding directly into local community providers. The SCITT programme is a rigorous, “hands-on” route to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) that allows trainees to learn on the job within local schools. For Danny, this is where the “theoretical basis” of his Early Years degree meets the “live” unpredictable nature of the classroom.

“The degree provided a broad knowledge base that serves as a launchpad,” Danny says, “but SCITT provides the practical practice.” He notes that working across multiple schools is a vital part of the process, helping trainees understand which environment truly fits their teaching style. By engaging with local employer news and initiatives, Danny isn’t just a student; he is an active participant in the local education ecosystem, gaining insight into Planning, Preparation, and Assessment (PPA) sessions and the organisational grit required to run a successful classroom.

The Grit Behind the Grade

Teacher training is often described as a “baptism by fire,” and Danny is candid about the reality: “Teaching is not easy.” While he acknowledges the challenges – including the lack of pay in most SCITT routes – he remains optimistic. He admits that he initially worried about not being the “average” primary school teacher, but he soon found that his unique background was his greatest strength.

His resourcefulness is evident in his methodology. A self-proclaimed “fan of lists,” Danny uses rigorous planning and end-goal visualisation to manage the high stakes of the classroom. While others have already earmarked him as a future headteacher, Danny remains modestly focused on the present. For him, personal success isn’t an “aggressive career drive” toward a title; it is the daily impact he has on children who might otherwise “slip through the net.”

The Art of Switching Off

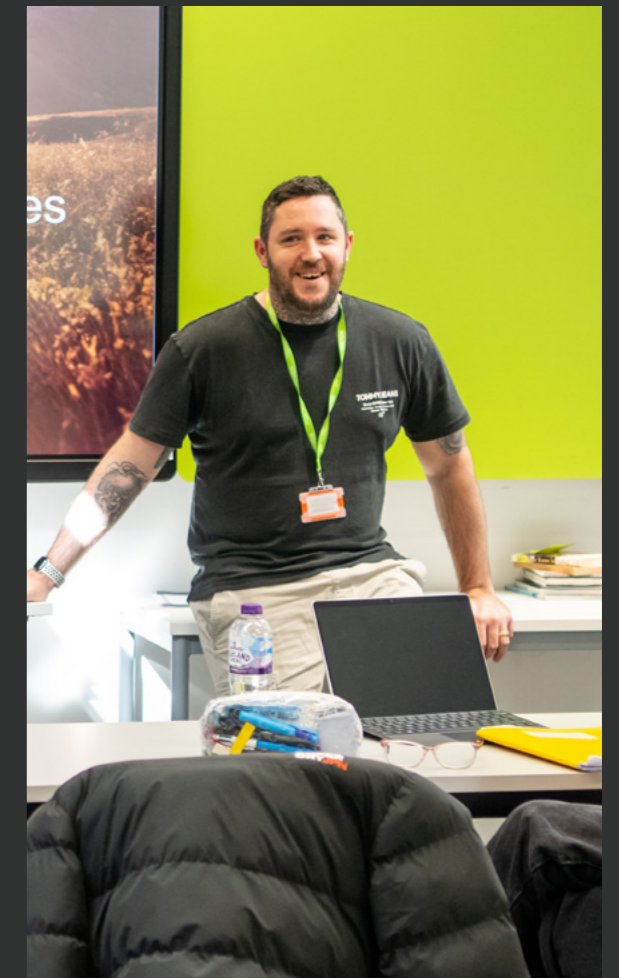
In an industry famous for burnout, Danny’s approach to wellbeing is a vital takeaway for any upcoming graduate. The “Trainee’s Tightrope” – balancing an intensive workload with personal life – requires more than just hard work; it requires the discipline to stop.

Danny credits his UCSE lecturers, specifically Anne Vaughan and Maria Cruickshank, for guiding him not just academically, but personally. “Anne Vaughan supported me in creating a list I can follow to switch off,” he explains. His top survival tip for final-year students? “Take time for yourself. Accept that you have done enough and there’s nothing more that can be done for the day.” This ability to reclaim “you time” is the cornerstone of his balance, ensuring that “Danny the Teacher” doesn’t overshadow Danny the person.

Paying it Forward: A Community Legacy

Danny recently returned to UCSE to present to current undergraduates, sharing the raw, honest truth about the leap into teacher training. For him, success is a collective effort. He speaks warmly of Maria Cruickshank’s mentorship, noting that her guidance was instrumental in convincing him that the University Centre was the right place for his “master plan.”

By returning to support the next generation, Danny is “paying it forward,” ensuring that the community that supported his growth continues to flourish. His journey from retail to the classroom, supported by local SCITT initiatives and UCSE’s dedicated faculty, reminds us that the world truly is our oyster – if we have the resourcefulness to go after it.



Take time for yourself. Accept that you have done enough and there’s nothing more that can be done for the day.



The Art of the Pivot: Daniel Teper

Securing a job offer “on the spot” is the kind of professional milestone most people wait years to achieve. For Daniel Teper, a second-year BSc (Hons) Applied Sport and Exercise Science student, it was a moment where preparation met presence. Daniel recently stepped into a role as a Cover Supervisor at a secondary school, a position he secured not just through his academic credentials, but through a decade-long foundation of community coaching and a fearless approach to opportunity. Yet, beneath the high-speed success of the interview lies a deeper story of navigating “imposter syndrome” and finding the resourcefulness to stay grounded when the stakes are high.

The Power of the ‘On the Spot’ Offer

What made Daniel stand out to his interviewers so decisively? It was his ability to “connect the dots” between the lecture theatre and the real world. During the interview, Daniel leaned heavily on his degree-level knowledge of disability, differentiation, and stress management. By demonstrating how to adapt techniques for diverse student needs, he proved he wasn’t just a candidate – he was a solution.

“The interviewers were impressed by my prior experience, including seven years of coaching,” Daniel reflects. He also credits a previous, high-pressure interview with Essex Police as a vital “learning-by-doing” experience. Even when an interview doesn’t result in a job, Daniel views it as an exercise in resourcefulness, sharpening the tools he needed to walk into the school environment with confidence.

Navigating the First-Day ‘Overwhelm’

Despite his confidence in the interview, the reality of the first day in a secondary school brought a familiar foe: imposter syndrome. “I’m an anxious person,” Daniel admits, “and that first day was a challenge.” To navigate the overwhelming nature of the role, he turned to the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding method – a sensory tool to manage anxiety – and took on the “stern” advice of his mentors to establish his presence in the classroom.

By the end of day one, the anxiety had shifted into an “overwhelming sense of reward.” This transition is the heartbeat of our Wellbeing theme: recognising that growth often lives on the other side of discomfort. For Daniel, the challenging nature of the role hasn’t just added a line to his CV; it has “raised the bar” for what he knows he can handle.

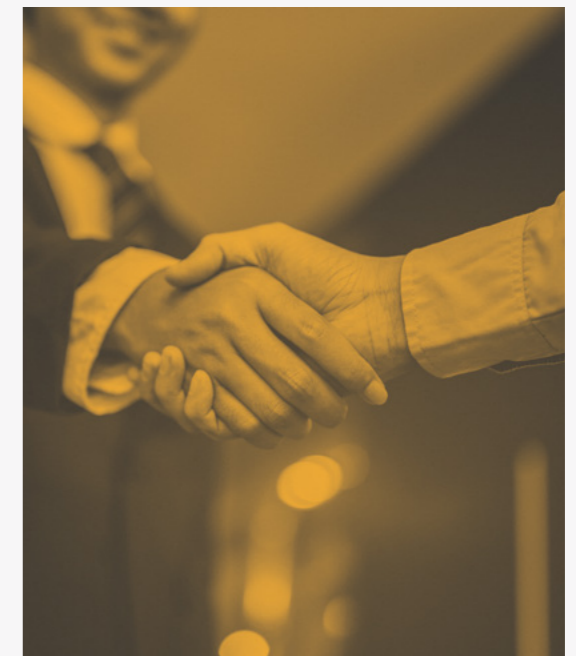
A Meaningful Life Beyond the Job Title

For Daniel, personal success isn’t tied to a single achievement or a specific job role; it is an intrinsic drive to serve the community. Whether through his current teaching role or his long-term goal of joining the emergency services, his motivation remains the same: helping others. He maintains his own balance by returning to sport, using physical activity as a form of “recovery” for his mental health.

“Trust your gut,” Daniel advises fellow students and alumni. “Recognise the small wins and move on to the next thing.” His journey reminds us that our “whole person” is built through every small achievement, every rejection handled with grace, and the resourcefulness to keep moving forward. Daniel Teper isn’t just following a career path – he is building a life of impact, one resourceful step at a time.



Recognise the small wins and move on to the next thing.



The Magic of Resilience:

Emily Burrett

At eleven years old, Emily Burrett was already a director. Armed with an iPad and a group of willing friends, she was busy building digital worlds long before she understood the technicalities of a frame rate or a jump cut. Today, Emily is entering her fourth year as a Social and Video Producer at Magic Radio, directing celebrity guests and managing high-stakes shoots for one of the UK's most recognisable media brands.

Since her graduation from the BA (Hons) Film & Television Production programme, we have followed Emily's journey from the "endless" job hunt of her early twenties to the fast-paced broadcast suites she now calls home. Her path was forged in the heat of a local bakery, sustained by a bespoke portfolio, and driven by a level of grit that defines our core values of Resourcefulness and Personal Success. Today, Emily offers a candid look at what it takes to stay creative when your job is "always-on," and why the "little wins" are the true markers of a meaningful life.

The Evolution of Professional Grit

When Emily first shared the story of her transition from retail into the media industry, the focus was on the "hustle" – the need to stand out among thousands of applicants. Four years later, that resourcefulness has evolved from an external search into an internal instinct. In the fast-paced environment of Magic Radio, the luxury of "university time" – where a student might have days to deliberate over a concept – has vanished.

"I have to come up with solutions a lot quicker now," Emily explains. "I use my creative spark to manage last-minute shoot changes or late guests on the spot. I've had to become much more resourceful in handling challenges in a shorter time period." Whether it's pivoting a script during a live recording or jumping on a trending social media topic before it expires, Emily's ability to solve problems "in the moment" has become her professional signature.





Protecting the 'Fun' in a 24/7 Feed

While the media industry is often romanticised, the reality of social media production can be exhausting. When your office exists in the palm of your hand, the boundary between "work" and "life" can easily blur. For Emily, protecting her wellbeing means being intentional about her digital consumption. "Social media can be tough," she admits. "I try to keep my job separated from my life—when I'm out of office hours, I try not to check accounts unless needed." To combat the negativity that often pervades the internet, Emily tailors her "For You" page to show positive content and maintains a Pinterest board full of art and graphic design to keep her inspired rather than drained.

Perhaps her most effective "wellbeing hack" is her hobby: fixing old cameras. By saving up for vintage equipment and repairing it herself, she creates a physical, tactile separation from the high-tech, digital tools she uses at work. "It gives me a separation," she says. "And I've learned that it's okay to have days where you just relax. You shouldn't feel like you have to be creative all the time. Those days help 're-charge' you for when you actually need to be."

Acknowledging the Hard Work Behind the 'Luck'

One of the most striking parts of Emily's reflection is her shift in perspective regarding her own success. For a long time, she attributed her career at Magic Radio to "luck." Today, she sees the "whole person" behind the achievement.

"In reality, I worked quite hard during College and University, and part of that luck was due to my hard work," she reflects. As the first person in her close family to earn a degree, Emily has realised that personal success isn't just about the "big wins" like directing celebrities; it's about the resilience she showed during the string of rejections she faced before landing her role.

By celebrating the "little wins" - like wrapping a smooth shoot or designing a graphic she's proud of - Emily has found a sustainable way to view her career. She isn't just a producer; she is a resilient, first-generation graduate who has protected the joy of that 11-year-old with an iPad. Her journey reminds us that while the industry might be "who you know," staying in it is about how well you know - and look after - yourself.



I've had to become much more resourceful in handling challenges in a shorter time period

The Power of the "Ask": Mike Stewart

Silence, Soundscapes, and the Strength of the 'Ask': A Full-Circle Journey

In the competitive corridors of academia, the journey from student to lecturer is typically measured in decades. It is a path often paved with slow-burning tenures and incremental climbs. Yet, for Mike Stewart, this trajectory has moved with the rhythmic precision of one of his own musical compositions.

A recent graduate of the BA (Hons) Criminology and Forensic Investigation programme at University Centre South Essex (UCSE), Mike has achieved what many only dream of: transitioning from the student desk to the front of the lecture theatre in the very department where he first discovered his passion. Now serving as a Lecturer in Criminology and Forensic Investigation, Mike's story is not just one of academic merit, but a masterclass in resourcefulness, the power of persistence, and the vital importance of maintaining a "whole-person" identity in a high-pressure field.

The Architecture of an Academic Rise

Mike's academic tapestry is rich and varied. His journey didn't begin with a direct entry into a degree; it started with the foundational grit of an Access course. This was followed by his undergraduate degree and, most recently, a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PgCE) at UCSE. Each step was a deliberate brick in the wall of his professional identity.

However, the most compelling part of Mike's story isn't found in his qualifications alone, but in his philosophy of the "Ask." In a world where many fear the word "no," Mike has embraced it as a necessary beat in the process of success.

"I've found that rejection rarely comes in the form of a clear 'no,'" Mike observes. "More often,



it comes as silence. You can send what feels like hundreds of applications and hear nothing back. It's a difficult experience, but that process can be incredibly productive if you approach it the right way."

For Mike, resourcefulness isn't about having all the answers; it's about the courage to follow up. By volunteering his time, asking questions beyond the formal application process, and making himself a familiar name in the department, he bypassed the anonymity of the digital "submit" button. He treated every application as a "first attempt," refining his CV and interview technique with a resilience that eventually made his transition from student to Further Education (FE) teacher – and finally to Higher Education (HE) lecturer – seem almost inevitable.

The Identity Shift: Empathy as Authority

Stepping into a position of authority within the same institution where you were once a learner can be a psychological tightrope. There is often a temptation for new lecturers to distance themselves from their student roots to establish "gravitas." Mike, however, took the opposite approach.

"Initially, there was a temptation to distance myself from that identity to establish authority," he admits. "However, I quickly realised that being a recent graduate is actually an advantage. It gives me a clear understanding of what learners experience – what engages them, what challenges them, and what support they need."

Combined with the pedagogical training of his PgCE, Mike has used his "full-circle" moment to foster a classroom environment built on honesty. He rejects the trope of the "all-knowing" academic, instead encouraging a culture where seeking support is viewed as a professional strength. "At some point, everyone leaned on someone," he says, "and in the future, someone may lean on you."

Criminology, Gaming, and the Art of the Reset

The study of Criminology and Forensic Investigation is, by its nature, heavy. Engaging with the complexities of crime, the nuances of the justice system, and the darker aspects of human behaviour requires a high degree of emotional fortitude. To maintain his wellbeing and balance, Mike has mastered the art of the "reset."

His secret? Gaming and writing music. These aren't just hobbies; they are essential components of his personal success. In these spaces, Mike isn't a lecturer or a forensic specialist; he is a creator and an explorer.

"Maintaining space outside of work is so important," Mike explains. "Gaming and music help me stay grounded and remind me that my identity isn't defined solely by my role. My 'get used to rejection' mindset helps here, too. It's about normalising challenge as part of professional growth, which reduces rumination. If a lesson doesn't land, I don't internalise it as a failure – I move quickly into reflection and adjustment."

By separating his personal identity from professional feedback, Mike has built a mental resilience that allows him to tackle the "heavy" subject matter of his field without carrying the weight of it home.

The Bravery of Higher Education

As Mike continues to shape the minds of future criminologists, his advice to his students remains unconventional yet deeply grounded in the reality of the 2026 professional landscape. He champions persistence over perfection, urging students to see their degree as a baseline – a launchpad that must be supplemented with a proactive, resourceful spirit.

"Choosing to pursue higher education now is both valuable and, in many ways, a brave decision," Mike reflects. "The key is to keep going, stay adaptable, and look for ways to position yourself beyond the minimum expectations."

Mike Stewart's story reminds us that we are all "whole people" in a constant state of becoming. Whether he is at the front of a lecture hall or behind a guitar, he embodies the spirit of our community: a lifelong learner who understands that the greatest successes come to those who aren't afraid to ask, fail, and try again.



The key is to keep going, stay adaptable, and look for ways to position yourself beyond the minimum expectations.



The Inner Courage of Jade Jackson-Byrne



Brave Change, Gentle Support

Most students view their graduation date as the "starting line" for their professional lives. Jade Jackson-Byrne, a BA (Hons) Counselling graduate, decided to build the track while she was still running the race. Before even receiving her final degree results, Jade had already launched a business, hosted a podcast, and delivered workshop series to local schools. Her journey is a profound study in resourcefulness, illustrating how personal history and academic theory can merge to create something that serves the "whole person."

The Architecture of Inner Courage

Jade's business, appropriately named Inner Courage, didn't emerge from a simple desire for entrepreneurship; it grew from what she describes as "the ashes of merging with her Jungian shadow." For Jade, the degree was more than a qualification – it was a period of intense self-discovery. Coming from a blended family and navigating the world as a neurodivergent individual, she rarely felt she fit into a "solid, concrete narrative."

By leaning into the bio-psychosocial holistic health model, Jade began to see wellbeing as a panoramic experience. This "peeling back of layers" allowed her to transform her own need for understanding into a service for others. Her business philosophy is simple yet powerful: "Brave change; gentle support." It is a rejection of the social constructs that keep people "boxed in," offering instead a space where identity is recognised as transient and fluid.



You walk through a door and see where it takes you.



The Hustle vs. The Valve

Launching a startup while finishing a Counselling degree is the ultimate test of balance. Jade is candid about the "heavy lifting" involved. Her resourcefulness was particularly evident in her use of LinkedIn, which she describes as "fruitful" for securing interviews and workshops. However, she quickly learned that "inner courage" also has its limitations.

"It's important to know when to hand over duties," Jade explains, citing her decision to hire an accountant rather than struggle through finances herself. To prevent burnout – a topic she is currently addressing in a fellowship with a national healthcare provider – Jade relies on a close-knit support group and neurodivergent theorist circles online. Her mantra for protecting her mental health is clear and uncompromising: "No' is a full sentence."

Walking Through Doors

Jade's approach to success is metaphorical: "You walk through a door and see where it takes you." This curiosity has led her to unlikely places, from delivering mock interviews for schoolchildren to an upcoming appearance on BBC Radio Essex. She is even pursuing "metaphor training" to better articulate complex emotional issues for her clients.

Through it all, Jade has learned that personal success is as much about silence as it is about being forthcoming. Her time at University Centre South Essex helped her pivot from a focus on self-worth to the art of active listening and congruence. Her advice for those feeling "stuck" is to look inward before looking out: "Take time to reflect, find that inner courage, and be curious. You never know how fruitful an opportunity may become."

The Velocity of Growth: Érin Hanlon



The Velocity of Growth: How Érin Hanlon is Redefining the Leadership Journey

There is a common misconception in the professional world that leadership is a destination reached only after decades of quiet climb. We are taught to wait our turn, to “put in the time,” and to view senior roles as the ultimate prize at the end of a long, linear marathon. But every so often, a story emerges that challenges this narrative – one driven by an insatiable curiosity and a brand of resourcefulness that turns months into milestones.

Érin Hanlon’s trajectory is exactly that. A self-confessed “perpetual student” with a deep-seated love for the mechanics of learning, Érin graduated with a Distinction in her Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PgCE) from University Centre South Essex (UCSE) in the summer of 2025. By February 2026, less than a year later, she had already ascended to the role of Deputy Head of Department at Chelmsford College. It is a meteoric rise by any standard, yet to focus solely on her title is to miss the true heart of her story. Behind the swift promotion lies a narrative of self-discovery, the courage to face “sink or swim” moments, and a vital, newfound commitment to the philosophy that “you cannot pour from an empty cup.”

A Masterclass in Resourcefulness: The UCSE Toolkit

Érin’s journey into the Creative Industries department at Chelmsford College began as a Graduate Trainee Teacher while she was still navigating her PgCE studies. The transition from student to leader happened not by chance, but through a series of “lightbulb moments” triggered by sudden changes in departmental staffing. When responsibilities increased and she was tasked with becoming an Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) lead, Érin didn’t retreat; she leaned into the resourcefulness she had cultivated at UCSE.

“Confidence was the key thing that shifted for me,” Érin reflects. “I struggled with believing in my abilities throughout my PgCE studies, despite strong feedback. My course tutor at UCSE, Chris Brookes, instilled in me the importance of self-belief.” This wasn’t just abstract encouragement. Érin credits the “UCSE toolkit” – a blend of academic rigour and real-world application – for providing the scaffolding she needed. Unlike previous higher education experiences that felt purely theoretical, her time at UCSE was an exercise in immediate application. Every model learned was a tool to be used in the classroom the next day. This bridge between theory and practice allowed her to trust her professional judgment when the department needed it most.

The Weight of Leadership: Prioritising the ‘Whole Person’

With rapid success often comes a heavy workload. When Érin first stepped into her role as Deputy Head, her drive to prove her abilities and support her team meant that her own wellbeing and balance initially fell off the priority list. In the rush to ensure student success and reduce pressure on her colleagues, she found herself neglecting the very resilience she needed to sustain her role.

It was a commitment made over the Easter break that changed her trajectory. Realising that her own health was the engine behind her department’s success, she pivoted toward a “person-centered” management style. “I made a commitment to myself to prioritise wellbeing and model this for staff,” she says. This involves a radical kind of transparency: asking for help when needed, setting realistic boundaries, and – crucially – not taking the work home.

By adopting a “learner-first” approach to leadership, Érin now treats her staff with the same empowerment and guidance she once offered her students. She views her role not as a taskmaster, but as a mentor who normalises conversations around mental health. In doing so, she is proving that high standards and high wellbeing are not mutually exclusive; they are, in fact, dependent on one another.

Redefining Success: From Destination to Journey

Many would look at Érin’s 2026 promotion and see a final destination. But for Érin, personal success has undergone a total transformation. She has moved away from viewing success as a checkbox or a milestone to be “ticked off” a list. Instead, she sees it as a continuous opportunity to make meaningful change and grow her own skills.

If she could travel back to her graduation day in 2025, her advice to her younger self would be simple: “Relieve the pressure of feeling like there is a specific destination to ‘arrive’ at. Zoom out and see the whole journey as a little piece of success every single day.” It is a reminder that confidence doesn’t come from having all the answers, but from the strength of the support network you build and the bravery to say “yes” to challenges that feel just slightly out of reach.

Érin Hanlon is no longer just a “perpetual student” – she is a leader who understands that the most important lesson in education isn’t found in a curriculum, but in the balance of a life well-lived. As she continues her QTLS qualification, she remains grounded in her original curiosity, proving that the fastest way to the top is to never stop learning how to look after yourself and those around you.

The Ethical Sprint: Callum Hegg

Most people spend their lives trying to find just one thing they are truly excellent at. Callum Hegg, a 2023 BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration graduate, has already mastered several. From representing England as a Paralympic athlete to co-founding a burgeoning creative agency, Callum's journey is a masterclass in the "Resourcefulness" our magazine celebrates.

But if you ask Callum about his success, he won't lead with his medals or his client list. Instead, he'll talk about the "learning curve" of balance, the importance of ethical boundaries in a digital world, and the profound resilience required to choose growth over perfection. Callum is a "whole person" whose career is not a ladder, but a series of challenges met with grit, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to his community.

From Podium to Pixels

Callum's background is a vivid tapestry of high-performance discipline and "front-line" reality. The resilience required to compete at a Paralympic level doesn't simply vanish when the kit is hung up; it translates directly into the "sprint" of entrepreneurship. Together with his co-founder, Owen, Callum launched Peak X Studio, a marketing and web design agency that manages over 55 websites.

"I think I've had hard work instilled in me from a very young age," Callum reflects. "My mum always said that you can have anything you want in life as long as you work for it." This work ethic

was tested early on. Before the studio lights were turned on, Callum was clocking off from a 9-to-5 and immediately diving into another 30 hours of work for Peak X. It is a level of dedication that is rarely glamorous but entirely necessary for a startup to survive.

Ethics in a Digital Age

In an industry currently obsessed with the speed and cost-cutting of Artificial Intelligence, Peak X Studio has taken a radical, "value-driven" stand. Callum and Owen came out swinging with a hard stance against AI-generated art, citing the non-consensual use of artists' work as a fundamental ethical breach.

"It has always been important to us to appreciate the design community that we grew up in," Callum explains. For him, Personal Success isn't measured solely by profit margins, but by the respect he maintains for his peers and collaborators. In the often-impersonal world of digital marketing, this ethical anchor differentiates Peak X. It's not just about the output; it's about the integrity of the process.

The 'Milkshake Machine' Philosophy of Resourcefulness

Before he was a director, Callum was a "front-line" worker at McDonald's and Tesco. While some might see these roles as mere stepping stones, Callum views them as his primary education in Resourcefulness.

"No one is more angry than a McDonald's customer when the milkshake machine is broken," he jokes. But the takeaway was serious: empathy. Callum realised that "no one is the bad guy of their own story." This ability to manage friction and understand the "why" behind a client's stress has become his secret weapon. It allows Peak X to be intimately involved in their clients' businesses, turning potential friction into collaborative success.

The Polaroid Perspective

Despite his professional achievements, Callum is refreshingly honest about the difficulty of maintaining Wellbeing and Balance. In an "always-on" digital role, the creative spark can easily be smothered by the sheer volume of output.

"I would be lying if I told you that I did balance it well all the time," he admits. To combat burnout, Callum relies on two things: a solid support network – including his partner, Eden, and his family – and a "non-success metric" hobby. For Callum, that is Polaroid photography. Because the photos don't go online and aren't subject to likes or professional critiques, they offer a space for pure, unmeasured joy. It is a vital reminder that we are more than our "performance."

The Courage to Fail

Callum's academic journey at South Essex was marked by a deliberate choice: to prioritize learning over "perfection." Despite his Cerebral Palsy affecting his manual dexterity, he challenged himself to use a new piece of software for every module. He even tackled digital illustration for his final major project – something he had never done before.

"I imagine my grades were lower because of it," he says, "but the fact that I challenged myself is what I'm proud of." His advice to current students is a radical rejection of the "perfect graduate" myth: "Fail. Fail all the time and be comfortable that you're still learning."

Now in his mid-twenties, Callum's definition of a "meaningful life" has done a total 180. The early dreams of money and early retirement have been replaced by the satisfaction of having full control over his creative input and seeing his work impact local businesses he can physically visit. He has moved from the finish line of the track to the heart of his community, proving that success is not a medal you win, but the integrity and curiosity you bring to every single day.



No one is more angry than a McDonald's customer when the milkshake machine is broken.



The Architecture of Advocacy: Elona Qytyku

The Architecture of Advocacy: Elona Qytyku's Journey from the Classroom to the Front Line

At University Centre South Essex (UCSE), the definition of community isn't confined to the four walls of a lecture theatre. It is found in the ripple effect created when a student takes a piece of theory and transforms it into a life-changing practice within the local landscape. Our "UCSE and Its Community" section aims to spotlight those who don't just graduate, but who evolve into the protectors and builders of our local social fabric.

Elona Qytyku, a BA (Hons) Early Years Care and Education graduate, is the personification of this mission. Having recently completed the first year of her Master's in Social Care, Elona is currently navigating the "brave leap" from the nursery setting to the complex, high-stakes world of child protection. Her story is one of profound resourcefulness, illustrating how a degree is never a final destination, but a foundation – a launchpad for a "whole person" dedicated to shaping positive outcomes for the most vulnerable members of our community.

The Academic Bridge

The transition from Early Years to Social Work is a path often discussed but rarely walked with such deliberate intent. For Elona, the move was born from a realisation that her capacity to help children extended beyond the classroom. However, making that leap required a specific kind of internal resilience.

"My time at UCSE helped me realise that I was capable of more than I sometimes believed," Elona reflects. She credits the culture at UCSE – specifically the mentorship of lecturers like Maria Cruickshank – for sowing the seeds of this confidence. By encouraging Elona to think "outside the box" and move beyond a linear career path, Maria helped her develop the critical thinking skills necessary for advanced study.

This is the essence of lifelong learning: the understanding that your initial qualification is a toolkit, not a cage. For Elona, the skills honed in Early Years – observation, empathy, and child development – became the very tools she now uses to navigate the intricate narratives of social care.

The Safeguarding "Lightbulb": A Global Perspective

Every advocate has a "why" – a moment where the weight of their purpose becomes clear. For Elona, that moment came during her safeguarding modules. Her perspective is uniquely shaped by her background in Albania, a country where safeguarding policies were implemented much later than in the UK.

"Studying safeguarding at university was a real turning point," she says. "It made me realise the hidden struggles many children can go through and how important it is for professionals to notice, listen, and act." This cross-cultural realisation sparked a passion for child protection that has become her career's North Star.

In the context of our local community, Elona's journey represents the "positive outcomes" UCSE strives for. By training professionals who can "see beyond the surface," we are ensuring that the local community is served by individuals who don't just follow procedures, but who feel a deep, personal responsibility to advocate for those who do not have the words to explain their experience.

Balancing the Heavy Lifting

If Social Work is the work of the heart, then wellbeing and balance are the work of the soul. Navigating a Master's degree while dealing with "real people and real struggles" can lead to emotional exhaustion if not managed with care. Elona is candid about the intensity of her new field, acknowledging that caring deeply does not have to mean carrying the weight alone.

To stay grounded, Elona has developed her own "valves" for releasing pressure. Her routine is a masterclass in maintaining the "whole person":

- Purpose-Driven Reflection – Reconnecting with why she started – the children who need a strong advocate.
- Intentional Rest – Giving herself permission to switch off and step away from the cases.
- Connection – Prioritising time with loved ones to separate her professional identity from her personal self.

"To support others well, I also have to look after myself," she notes. This insight is vital for any alumnus working in "people-focused" industries. It highlights that personal success is inextricably linked to how well we guard our own mental and emotional energy.

Success Reimagined

In the early stages of her academic career, Elona admits she viewed success through the lens of status and impressive titles. Today, having walked the path of self-discovery, her definition has shifted toward purpose. Success is no longer a certificate on a wall; it is the ability to make a tangible difference in a child's life.

As she looks toward her final year of Master's study and an eventual career in child protection, Elona has a message for fellow alumni who feel "stuck" in the lane they chose at age eighteen: "Your degree is not a box, it is a foundation."

Elona's journey serves as a powerful reminder to the UCSE community that curiosity is a professional virtue. Whether you are staying local or moving into global advocacy, the path to a meaningful life is found in the willingness to chase the possibilities that feel right, even when they require a "brave transition." Elona isn't just a Social Work student; she is a future leader in community safety, proving that at UCSE, we don't just graduate students – we empower the architects of a better future.



My time at UCSE helped me realise that I was capable of more than I sometimes believed.





The Architecture of Intellectual Humility: Rebekah Aldridge

There is a specific kind of exhaustion that belongs solely to the high-achiever – the person who has mastered one field only to realise that their curiosity demands they dismantle their own expertise and start from scratch in another. For Rebekah Aldridge, a BA (Hons) Early Years Care and Education and PGCE graduate, the last year has been defined by this precise friction.

Currently finishing a Master's degree that she describes with characteristic candour as a "literal killer," Rebekah is at a threshold. She is transitioning from the practical, noisy, and immediate world of

the classroom to the quiet, complex, and theoretical corridors of Educational Psychology. As she prepares to apply for a PhD, her story offers a profound look at the magazine's core themes: how resourcefulness is born from the ashes of academic burnout, and how personal success is found not in the accumulation of certificates, but in the "quiet confidence" of knowing how to learn.

The Unlearning: Resourcefulness as Adaptation

Many alumni view their postgraduate journey as

a linear expansion of their undergraduate studies – a simple adding of floors to an existing building. For Rebekah, moving from the practicalities of a PGCE to a Master's at Brunel felt less like an addition and more like a total demolition.

"I have found none of the styles I learnt on my degree and PGCE are acceptable at Brunel," she admits. "I needed to learn all over again."

This is where the theme of resourcefulness takes on a deeper, more gritty meaning. It is often mischaracterised as merely a makeshift or reactive talent for fixing problems

with limited tools. But in Rebekah's world, resourcefulness was the humility to admit that her previous "toolkit" wasn't working. It meant engaging with a new institutional landscape, bypassing the traditional personal tutor model, and seeking out academic skill centres and specialised sites to master the elusive "Master's level" voice.

It was a pivot from being the "expert" in the classroom to being the "novice" in the library. This willingness to be a beginner again is the hallmark of the whole person – someone who values the growth process more than the ego of being right.

What Remains of The Foundational Toolkit

Despite the radical shift in writing style, Rebekah's journey at University Centre South Essex (UCSE) provided the structural "rebar" that keeps her current academic building standing. While the expression of her knowledge changed, the habits of her mind remained constant. She still leans on three core pillars from her original UCSE toolkit:

Source Evaluation – The disciplined, almost instinctive habit of questioning an author's bias. In a world of "fake news" and academic echo chambers, this skill is more vital than ever.

Reference Categorisation – The logic of attribution. Beyond just avoiding plagiarism, this is about understanding the "conversation" of history – knowing who said what and why it matters.

Structured Note-Taking – The ability to synthesise. Rebekah's practice of breaking down massive, intimidating textbooks into clear summaries is what allows her to stay afloat in the sea of Master's-level reading.

These are the "invisible" successes of a degree. Long after the specific facts of a module are forgotten, the resourcefulness of a structured mind remains.

The 80/20 Rule: A Strategy for Survival

One of the most profound sections of Rebekah's reflection deals with the dark side of high achievement: academic burnout. In the pursuit of "the perfect essay," she describes staying up for days on end, agonising over twenty-seven different drafts. It is a cycle many of our alumni will recognise – the belief that if we just work a



Plan it out and believe
in your own work.



little harder, sleep a little less, and obsess a little more, we can achieve a "perfect" outcome.

Rebekah's breakthrough came through a piece of advice that redefined her approach to wellbeing and balance: the 80/20 rule.

"80% of the effort you put in is enough to pass," she explains. "The other 20% to get your work to 100 would take another 80% of effort and cause burnout." This isn't an argument for laziness; it is an argument for sustainable excellence. By recognising that the final 20% of "perfection" is often subjective and dependent on a marker's opinion, Rebekah learned to trust her own work earlier in the process. "Don't make 27 drafts," she advises. "Plan it out and believe in your own work."

This shift is a masterstroke of resourcefulness. It is the realisation that time is a finite resource, and spending it all on one "perfect" task leaves nothing left for the person behind the work.

Rituals of Rest

To maintain this balance, Rebekah has had to treat her wellbeing with the same academic rigour she applies to her PhD applications. Her "mental wellbeing break" is a spin class she attends six times a week. To an outsider, this might look like more work, but for Rebekah, the physical intensity is a necessary "valve" to release the mental pressure of psychological theory.

Furthermore, she has implemented “rituals of rest” that function as non-negotiable boundaries:

Scheduled Communication – She has stopped the “immediate response” cycle. By planning when she replies to messages, she prevents the digital world from overwhelming her academic focus.

The Matcha Boundary – A simple, 15-minute scheduled tea break. It is a small window of time, but its presence in her calendar signifies that her wellbeing is just as important as a lecture or an assignment.



Your initial qualification teaches you how to learn, but staying curious is what allows you to pivot and thrive in entirely new fields.



Success as a Journey of Humility

Perhaps the most moving part of Rebekah’s story is how her definition of personal success has moved inward. Earlier in her career, she felt that her worth was tied to external credentials. Lacking formal qualifications left her feeling inadequate.

Today, as she eyes a PhD, her perspective has done a total 180. “Reaching Master’s level training sparked an internal change,” she says. “Success is not an endpoint of absolute certainty, but a commitment to lifelong learning.”

She defines exceptional practice as a combination of two seemingly opposite traits: intellectual humility (the acknowledgement that we cannot know everything) and daily motivation (the drive to seek out new knowledge anyway). In this framework, the “Successful Alumnus” isn’t the one with the most titles, but the one who is the most open to being changed by what they learn.

The Message to the ‘Set in Stone’ Alumnus

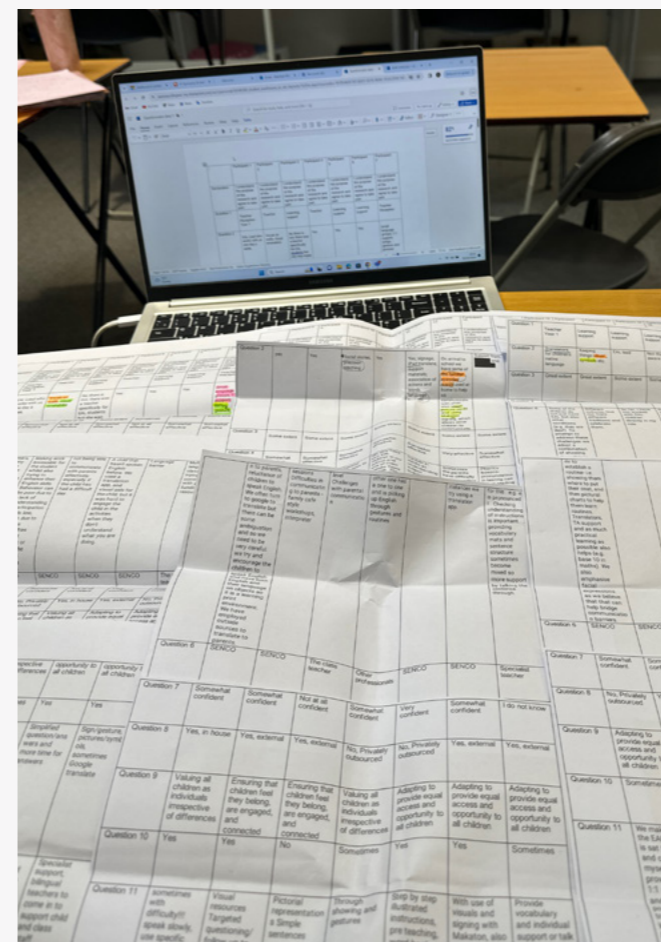
When asked what she would say to an alumnus who feels their career path is “set in stone” after their first degree, Rebekah is emphatic. A degree, she argues, is a foundation, not a life sentence.

“Your initial qualification teaches you how to learn, but staying curious is what allows you to pivot and thrive in entirely new fields,” she says. Her journey from the Early Years classroom to the front lines of Educational Psychology is living proof that reinvention is possible at any stage of life. It starts with the “quiet confidence” that you are capable of adapting.

A Community of Lifelong Learners

As Rebekah applies for her PhD and explores “side hustles” like marking for AQA and Pearson, she remains a vital part of the UCSE story. She is a reminder that the “Honorary Alumni” among us are not statues of past achievement, but active, striving, and sometimes exhausted individuals who are still “figuring it out.”

Her story tells us that wellbeing isn’t about avoiding the “killer” Master’s degree; it’s about having the spin class, the matcha break, and the 80/20 rule to survive it. It tells us that balance isn’t a 50/50 split between work and play, but a constant, resourceful adjustment of our sails. And finally, it tells us that success isn’t the PhD at the end of the road – it’s the curiosity that made us start the car in the first place.



Success is not an endpoint of absolute certainty, but a commitment to lifelong learning.





The Art of the Slow Burn: **Maddi Crease**

There is an unwritten, highly romanticised myth that surrounds the modern art graduate. It is a narrative of immediate velocity: the final degree show concludes and the young artist is propelled directly into the cultural stratosphere, riding a wave of endless energy and effortless output. But talk to anyone actually living the reality of the creative sector in 2026, and a different landscape emerges – one that is far more nuanced, quiet, and demanding of a deeper kind of fortitude.

Maddi Crease, a 2025 BA (Hons) Fine Art graduate, is currently living within that quiet landscape. Featured in our magazine as a spotlight voice, Maddi represents an essential archetype of the modern creative: an artist who understands that true resourcefulness is not about screaming into the void of an over-saturated industry, but about building an internal sanctuary that protects the whole person.

Just under a year since she stepped away from the sprawling, light-filled studios of University Centre South Essex (UCSE), Maddi's journey offers a profound counter-narrative to the standard definitions of post-university achievement. Her path is an exploration of what happens when the high-ceilinged independence of an art school is replaced by the realities of a full-time day job, chronic illness, and the socioeconomic desire for stable housing. Yet, far from a story of compromise, her experience provides a blueprint for how a creative spirit can weather the post-grad transition with dignity, radical honesty, and an uncompromising dedication to meaning-making.

The Architecture of Compression

To understand Maddi's creative evolution over the last twelve months is to understand the visceral shock of spatial and energetic compression. At university, an artist's practice is afforded room – both literally, in the physical acreage of a communal studio, and metaphorically, in the hours dedicated solely to the act of conceptual exploration.

"I definitely found it to be true that there is a huge shift after graduation," Maddi reflects. "For me, this was in part thanks to the inevitable transition period. I went from accessing creative spaces frequently at university, to having a much more compressed creative space, both in the physical spaces I can access and in the amount of energy I dedicate to being creative."

Today, the expansive collective energy of the university's 7th floor has been distilled down to a domestic desk and a garden. There is no white-cube studio space waiting for her at the end of a morning commute. Instead, Maddi has entered the workforce full-time, taking a role in co-production at a mental health charity.

For many purists, the introduction of a "day job" is framed as a defeat. For Maddi, it is an act of pragmatic self-advocacy. In an economic climate where the arts are increasingly precarious, she has chosen to prioritise her long-term human needs: financial stability, a mortgage, and the foundational dream of creating a secure home to start a family one day.

A POET IN EVERY PORT

By deliberately placing creativity temporarily lower on her immediate checklist, Maddi is practicing a sophisticated form of wellbeing and balance. She is refusing to let the capitalist pressure to "produce or perish" dictate her worth as a human being. Her resourcefulness lies in her ability to adapt to this smaller footprint without losing her artistic identity. She has negotiated the reality of her environment, recognising that an artist holding a day job is no less an artist than one with a gallery contract.

The Archaeology of Resilience: The Landscape of Autistic Joy

Maddi's capacity to stand by her own side during this period of transition was forged long before her graduation ceremony. Her academic journey was not an easy stroll from secondary school to higher education; it was an act of personal reclamation. Having lost her teenage years to severe mental illness, Maddi arrived at university without traditional A-levels or a BTEC, instead building her bridge through an Access course at South Essex College.

This history created a creative process that is inherently tender, personal, and profoundly resilient. During her second year at UCSE, Maddi engaged in what she calls a "ridiculous"

undertaking: a month-long artist residency with Metal Southend that blossomed into a fully funded project by Arts Council England. The result was *Autistic Joy* – a multidisciplinary short page, audio, and film poem produced in collaboration with local creatives and a charity partner.

The project became a massive part of her life, consuming her headspace throughout her dissertation year as she steered the film through international festival circuits and gallery features. Simultaneously, she hosted creative open mic events at the Leigh Community Centre, anchoring herself at the centre of Southend's local avant-garde network.

"Whilst all this made for two very busy years at university, it also further connected me with the incredible local creative community," she says. "The confidence this brought to my creative career allowed me to stand by my own side when it came time to leave the university and return to having only my desk and garden to make from."

This community became an emotional safety net. When the infrastructure of the institution dropped away, the human relationships remained. Maddi's story illustrates a vital truth for any graduating class: the resources that sustain you after university are rarely the

physical tools or the studio spaces – they are the networks of love, inspiration, and mutual support that you build while you are there.

Meaning-Making as a Survival Strategy

In the creative industries, visual art is frequently reduced to an aesthetic commodity – something designed to match a living room wall or generate engagement on a digital feed. Maddi rejects this entirely. As an autistic woman who spent years masking her true self to conform to neurotypical expectations, the creative process has become an essential laboratory for unadulterated self-discovery.

"I think the consistent strand across my process and something that helps me to protect my wellness in a sharp creative world is meaning-making. It is incredibly rare that I make work that I do not find a strong message, meaning, or emotive value within. For me, that feels soulless. I'm not a pretty picture girl, at all."

This commitment to substance over surface is what protects her wellbeing in an industry that can often feel transactional and cold. For Maddi, making art is a high-stakes emotional risk. Her work touches on delicate, vulnerable

themes that require an advanced understanding of "safe sharing." Drawing from her professional background within mental health charities and the NHS, she works carefully to ensure that both she and her audience are supported when dealing with heavy or challenging subject matter.

Yet, she admits that this boundary-setting remains a process of trial and error. There are still days when the exposure feels too raw, when the line between safe expression and personal vulnerability blurs. Her defence against this vulnerability is a radical acceptance of imperfection:

"For me, it comes down to remembering that I am more than how much I create, or how good I think it is. I will still be here if a poem goes down badly at an open mic, or a drawing looks wrong, or I don't get a red sticker in an exhibition. I will still be here if I don't get things 'right'. This is such a healing thing for anyone to realise."

The Politics of the Creative Block

One of the most refreshing aspects of Maddi's perspective is her refusal to participate in the toxic hustle culture that infects the contemporary art world. Creatives are frequently told that they must be prolific, that a day spent without generating content or working on



a portfolio is a day wasted. Maddi, who lives with chronic fatigue and the frequent threat of autistic burnout, treats rest not as a luxury or a reward for hard work, but as a non-negotiable operational requirement.

When hit by creative block – a state that can last for months – she doesn't try to force her way through it. She recognises that a forced line or a half-hearted poem is essentially worthless.

Instead of treating a creative drought as a personal failure, she recontextualises it as an invitation to transition from creator to consumer. She charts a different path through the block by reading, visiting galleries, and attending the events of her peers. She populates her mind with the work of others until that familiar, internal "itch" returns.

"I always hate the work I make when I'm burnt out and doing it because I 'should' anyway," she notes with sharp clarity. "Successful artists are blessed to care about what they make deeply. They appreciate the process, find play in it, and enjoy sharing this, as well as taking delight from others' work. When they need to rest, they rest. When they need to make, they make."



I will still be here if I don't get things 'right'. This is such a healing thing for anyone to realise.



The Turning of the Tide: The Southbank Centre and the Long View

It is precisely because Maddi allowed herself to rest and gather her strength during the post-graduation lull that she was able to seize her next major opportunity. As the festival circuit for Autistic Joy began to wind down and her local open mic chapters closed, a natural, somewhat intimidating creative void appeared.

Instead of panicking, Maddi used that quiet period to advocate for herself once more. She reapplied to the Southbank Centre's prestigious New Poets Collective – a scheme she had previously been rejected from. This time, as

the Southbank Centre celebrated its 75th anniversary by expanding the collective into a highly competitive two-year programme, Maddi was accepted as one of just fifteen poets selected from across the United Kingdom.

The timing was a poetic validation of her approach to balance. Had she spent the months after her degree forcing out uninspired work to maintain a false sense of productivity, she likely would have been too depleted to meet the demands of the Southbank collective. By giving herself permission to pause at her degree show, she preserved the energy required to step through a massive new door.

Advice to the Next Cohort

Looking back at her path, Maddi realises how much her understanding of personal success has shifted away from the competitive frameworks of her youth. Raised within the high-pressure environment of a grammar school, she was prepared for a traditional, high-status career path – frequently told she was destined to be a lawyer.

"I have come to realise that is just an adult's way of saying a child is arguing back too much," she laughs. "But starting my degree a bit later rather than diving straight in at 18 has allowed me to build a grounded sense of self within my ideas about success."

If she could return to the bustling, nervous energy of her 2025 degree show and offer one piece of wisdom to her younger self – and to the generations of UCSE students following in her footsteps – it would be to trust the utility of the quiet times. The gaps between funding, the spaces between projects, and the silent months of creative block are not empty space; they are the soil in which the next phase of growth takes root.

Maddi Crease's first year as an alumna is an elegant proof that success is not a sprint towards an arbitrary finish line. It is a slow, deliberate burn. It is the willingness to advocate for yourself when self-doubt creeps in, the maturity to choose a stable home over an idealised aesthetic lifestyle, and the profound intellectual humility to understand that you are always more than the things you produce. As she takes her place on the national stage at the Southbank Centre, Maddi remains deeply tied to her Essex roots, reminding us all that sometimes the most resourceful thing an artist can do is simply stop, breathe, and wait for the itch to return.



The Heart of Heartwood: Entrepreneurs of Early Years



In a quiet corner of University Centre South Essex (UCSE), a transformation is taking place. The traditional, solitary hum of the library has been replaced by the high-stakes, collaborative energy of a boardroom. Here, final-year students of the BA (Hons) Early Years Care and Education programme are doing more than just studying the future of childcare – they are building it.

Spearheaded by course leaders Anne Vaughan and Maria Cruickshank, this new initiative challenges students to move beyond the essay and into the executive suite. The task: develop a comprehensive "new school business proposal" for a fictional institution, Heartwood Steiner School. In a rigorous 80-minute pitch, the cohort had to prove that they possess the Resourcefulness, Resilience, and Entrepreneurial Thinking required to navigate the financial, regulatory, and ethical hurdles of the modern educational landscape.

Philosophy in Practice

The presentation opened with an air of professional gravitas, moving quickly from abstract theory to a tangible vision of a "calm" educational environment. This was not simply a curriculum pitch, but a study in wellbeing and confidence. Leading with anthroposocial characteristics, the group argued for an architecture of learning that complements social relationships.

This philosophical foundation was further developed through a commitment to student autonomy and nature-based stimulation. By suggesting a curriculum where the "walls are removed", the students highlighted self-awareness and social contribution as the drivers of an inclusive mindset, helping to bridge the gap between traditional teaching and modern critical thinking.

The Mechanics of Excellence

A school, however, cannot survive on philosophy alone. It requires the "heavy lifting" of regulatory compliance and the insights of industry-specific knowledge. Through their understanding of the complex language behind Ofsted's "Outstanding" criteria, alongside the intricacies of Prevent Duty and safeguarding, the students demonstrated that a reputable institution is built on a strong foundation of safety and data protection.

Their staffing models moved beyond simple recruitment, focusing instead on holistic training in SEND and behaviour management. This demonstrated a "whole person" approach to leadership, ensuring every adult in the building is as equipped as the students they serve. This meticulous attention to detail reflects the practical skills that the students' lecturers have fostered throughout the degree.

The Financial Frontier and Future-Proofing

Perhaps the most daunting hurdle was the transition from educator to entrepreneur. Moving the degree into the realm of real-world fiscal responsibility, the group delved into the "eye-opening" world of funding costs, premises deposits, and insurance. Molly Scott, who led the financial charge, noted that "digging deep" into the numbers was a revelation – a necessary pivot from the abstract to the entrepreneurial.

To ensure Heartwood was "future-proof," the proposal baked sustainability into the school's very DNA. Emily Archer's focus on the social, economic, and environmental factors of design displayed the digital and future work skills required in a contemporary organisation. They weren't just building a school for today; they were designing an institution that could withstand the shifting tides of the local economy.

The Stakeholder Circle

The presentation concluded with a reminder that no school exists in a vacuum. By fostering a "community of stakeholders" and treating parents as "partners" rather than customers, the group demonstrated that strong communication and collaboration are essential qualities for effective early years entrepreneurs.

Danielle Bickram, whose contribution to the presentation emphasised this importance, has already secured a role as an Equality Officer at a local nursery and serves as a strong example of the success of the UCSE journey. Her transition into the local community highlights that these students are graduating not just with a title, but with a mission.

The Resilience to Grow

As the 80-minute session drew to a close, the true achievement was not just the business plan itself, but the sheer scale of personal growth. The transition from the "Year One version" of these students – who may once have struggled with a team roleplay or presentation – to the "Year Three version" capable of delivering an hour-long business pitch is a testament to both the resilience of the cohort and the guidance of their tutors.

Maria Cruickshank watched the Q&A with the pride of a mentor. "All of the group have progressed," she noted, but the progression was more than academic. They have shown that they are ready to step into the local community as leaders, innovators, and collaborators. Heartwood Steiner School may be fictional, but the brave change and gentle support these graduates offer the community will be very real indeed.

The Author of His Own Script:

Luke Day

The transition from a university degree to the professional world is often framed as a departure, a final curtain call on a chapter of structured growth. But for Luke Day, a BA (Hons) Performing Arts graduate, that transition wasn't a departure at all. It was his next step into the world.

Luke's journey since graduating from University Centre South Essex (UCSE) is a powerful testament to the idea that our qualifications are not fixed labels, but adaptable frameworks. As he pivots from the collaborative, physical energy of the stage to the solitary, intricate world of self-published fantasy fiction, Luke is expanding the definition of what a creative career can actually look like. His story is a blueprint for anyone who has ever felt the weight of expectation, that sudden, heavy realisation that the "real world" is not a singular path, but a sprawling, unscripted improvisational scene.

The Weight of the Closing Door

For many, graduation is a day of triumph. For Luke, it was marked by a visceral "weight on his chest." Having been homeschooled before college, the university experience was his first true immersion into a larger community. When the deadline for his final project arrived, it didn't feel like an accomplishment; it felt like a loss. He realised he was closing a door he had not yet finished exploring.

"I was making myself believe I was setting myself up for failure," Luke reflects, "that without learning every tiny bit of knowledge within the walls of university, I would not succeed."

That fear is the silent companion of every graduate. We often mistakenly believe that the degree is the end of the education. It was only on the morning of his graduation, surrounded by the shared anxiety and optimism of his peers, that the weight shifted. He realised that the degree wasn't a verdict; it was simply the opening scene. Whatever followed, the rejections, the odd jobs, the long hours, they would eventually land him where he needed to be.

Repurposing the Toolkit

If you look at Luke's recent resume, it appears fragmented: a teaching assistant, a nursery worker, a carer, an actor, and an author. To the outside observer, it might look like a search for direction. To Luke, it is a clear example of creative resourcefulness.

He hasn't left his Performing Arts degree behind; he has simply repurposed it as the foundation for his writing. Every lesson he learnt from reading the work of Konstantin Stanislavski, every experiment in colour theory, and every gruelling month of script analysis has found a new home on the page. When Luke writes dialogue for his upcoming novel, *Finality: Gods and Fools*, he isn't just typing words; he is directing a scene in his head, measuring the pitch and tone as if the actors were standing on his stage.

He recalls a final-year exercise where his class explored the colour of dreams. The resulting answers, pink, blue, red, and the absolute absence of colour, became a permanent part of his creative infrastructure. It taught him that the most evocative work doesn't come from knowing the answer, but from knowing the right question to ask. "What questions like that can I ask to make my creations even more real?" he now asks himself. That curiosity is the engine of his practice.

The Courage to Be Everything

The most idiosyncratic part of Luke's story is his embrace of the "portfolio life." In a world that demands we specialise, to be only an actor, or only an author. Luke is proving that we have the capacity to be many things at once.

"I've been so many things in the span of six months," he shares. "That was my biggest challenge: understanding that I can be all those things. I decided that not everything had to be hard. And it was the greatest choice I ever made. I am doing it all my way."

This is the essence of wellbeing and balance as we understand it at UCSE. Balance is not a static 50/50 split between work and leisure; it is the freedom to change roles when the season calls for it. By working in childcare while simultaneously building a social media presence and finalising his manuscript, Luke is constructing a life that is as multifaceted as the characters he creates.

He is candid about the "difficult times", the months of acting rejections and the quiet frustration of the publishing industry. Yet, he holds fast to his support network: his family, his friends, and his partner, who celebrate him on the days he "does it all" and carry him on the days he feels he is doing nothing at all. This is the cornerstone of his personal success. It is not found in the validation of a publisher's contract, but in the integrity of showing up for himself every single day.

The Hero's Return

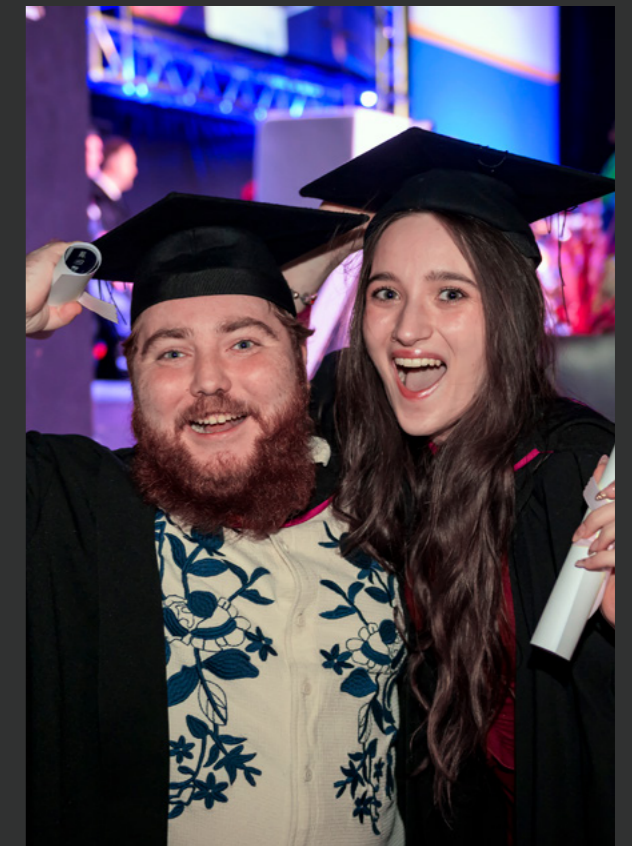
In his forthcoming book, *Finality: Gods and Fools*, Luke explores the plight of Milo, a knight who wakes from a centuries-long slumber to find the world he once protected transformed beyond recognition.

"When the world no longer believes in heroes," Luke's blurb asks, "what does it mean to be one?"

Perhaps that is the question we should all be asking as we leave the safety of our studies. The "heroes" of the creative industry are rarely the ones who land the biggest deals or win the loudest applause. They are the ones who, like Luke, wake up every morning in a world that is "scarred beyond recognition," and choose to continue writing their own story anyway.

Luke Day is currently living his own "Hero's Journey." It involves no iron or fire, but it requires just as much courage: the courage to be a teacher, a carer, and an author all at once; the courage to embrace the "gap" after graduation; and the courage to hold the door open, even when the university walls have long since faded behind him.

As he prepares for the Kindle release of his debut novel, Luke offers a final, humble reminder for us all: keep an eye out for his name. It will be there, on the cover, a testament to a graduate who stopped waiting for the world to write his script and decided to become the author instead.



That was my biggest challenge: understanding that I can be all those things. I decided that not everything had to be hard. And it was the greatest choice I ever made. I am doing it all my way.



The Art of the 'Unseen' Essential:

Sam Upton

When the theme tune to Strictly Come Dancing kicks in or the Britain's Got Talent buzzers ring out, the audience sees a polished world of glamour and high-stakes performance. What they don't see is the logistical engine room humming frantically behind the curtain. For Sam Upton, a BA (Hons) Film & Television Production graduate, that engine room is home.

Now a seasoned Production Coordinator, Sam's career began in the most resourceful way possible: in the middle of a global pandemic. Since 2020, he has moved at a pace that defies industry norms – transitioning from Runner to Production Assistant to Coordinator in a fraction of the time usually required. His story is a great example of resourcefulness, illustrating that personal success in the creative industries isn't just about what ends up on screen, but the resilience it takes to get it there.

The Logistics of Resourcefulness

Sam's first foray into the industry was the Britain's Got Talent Christmas Special in 2020. Entering the professional world during a lockdown required an immediate "freelance switch-on" – a mental agility that allows a person to hit the ground running with every new contract.

"When starting a career in TV, no one thinks about the Health and Safety, the finance, the logistics, contracts, and catering," Sam reflects. "However, without the Production Management department doing these things, the show would never get made. We are essential." This realisation shifted Sam's perspective on success. Instead of chasing the spotlight, he found fulfilment in being the "unseen essential," the person who ensures the show goes on regardless of the obstacles.

The 'Show Must Go On' vs. The Whole Person

The world of flagship TV is famous for its intensity. From coordinating contestants on Squid Game: The Challenge to supporting the production of MasterChef, the hours are long and the stakes are high. In an industry built on short-term, high-pressure contracts, maintaining wellbeing and balance becomes a deliberate act.

For Sam, staying grounded means recognising that his value isn't tied solely to his job title. He manages the "unpredictability" of freelance life by staying curious and viewing every new project as a fresh opportunity for self-discovery. Whether he is booking talent travel or creating a complex shoot schedule for Next On The Menu, Sam treats each task as a component of his broader professional growth.

Redefining the Win

Sam's progression is relatively unheard of in an industry where runners often spend years waiting for a "step up." He attributes this rapid rise to a mix of luck and an unwavering work ethic. But more importantly, he defines success as a continuous learning curve. "I consider my entire career up to this point a success," he says. "I've been incredibly lucky to have worked on amazing shows that have taught me so much about what really goes into creating TV."

For students currently looking at the "unpredictability" of the creative sector with trepidation, Sam's journey is a beacon. It proves that with enough resourcefulness, the gaps between contracts aren't just empty spaces – they are the moments where the "whole person" grows, prepares, and eventually, thrives.

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Finding the Light in the Storm:

Alexander Chettur

The film industry is often romanticised as a world of bright lights and red carpets, but for Alexander Chettur, the reality is far more grounded – and far more interesting. A BA (Hons) Film & Television graduate, Alex's journey is an exploration of resilient adaptability, proving that a filmmaker's greatest tool isn't always the camera in their hands, but the resilience in their character.

Turning the Tempest into Art

In the creative industries, things rarely go according to the call sheet. For Alex, a defining moment of "on-the-fly" problem-solving occurred during the production of his short film, *The Lone Wanderer*. Faced with an unexpected and brutal November storm, the easy choice would have been to wrap and wait. Instead, Alex and his crew leaned into the chaos.

"We persevered throughout the tough conditions," Alex reflects. "We used those conditions to our advantage to help support the visual narrative of the film." This ability to transform a logistical nightmare into a cinematic asset is the hallmark of a resourceful creative. It didn't end on set, either; Alex spent hours in the edit suite meticulously ensuring that the stormy atmosphere remained consistent, both visually and audibly, turning a weather-beaten shoot into a festival-ready success.

The 'Sponge' Philosophy and the Pandemic

Alex's resilience was forged in the heat of his final year – the era of global lockdowns. When faced with academic pushback and the suggestion that his Final Major Project (FMP) simply couldn't be made during a pandemic, Alex didn't settle for a "Zoom film." He used the scepticism as fuel. Through meticulous planning, constant COVID testing, and rigorous risk assessments, he brought his vision to life on his own terms.

It is this dogged persistence that led Alex to create five short films that have since travelled the globe, earning spots in prestigious festivals in Cannes, Los Angeles, and South Korea. When asked what advice he would give to current students intimidated by the "unpredictability" of the sector, his answer is simple: "Be a sponge."

"Absorb as much advice, feedback, and experience as possible to inform your journey. Use the resources, the studios, and the equipment while you have them – it is what propels you to where you need to be."

The Zen of the Edit Suite

While his professional output is high-octane, Alex is deeply aware that an "always-on" career requires a "switch-off" strategy. To protect his wellbeing and maintain balance, he has integrated a vital non-negotiable into his routine: meditation.

"The industry is designed in a way that can be quite overwhelming," Alex explains. "I ensure that I take breaks and allow for recovery. Meditation helps my mind clear from the stress and pressure of the working day, ensuring I stay focused." By treating his mental health with the same meticulous care he treats a film frame, Alex embodies the "whole person" philosophy, proving that personal success is as much about inner peace as it is about external credits.

A Legacy of Community

Alex's success is a testament to the power of the UCSE community. From his first short film, *Inner Rhythm*, produced alongside Dimensions Dance Company and UCSE Acting students, to his current role at Central Film School London, he remains a connected and grateful alumnus. For Alex, success isn't just about the awards in LA or Cannes; it's about the curiosity to keep learning and the resilience to keep filming – no matter which way the wind blows.



The Art of the Detour: Caitlin Clark

There is a steady, intentional rhythm to the way Caitlin Clark describes her work. It is not the language of headlines or corporate milestones; it is the language of the transformative moments that occur behind closed doors. For many graduates, the period immediately following the conferral of a degree is expected to be a sprint toward a pre-ordained finish line. For Caitlin, a 2025 BA (Hons) Counselling graduate, it became something far more interesting: an opportunity to go off-piste.

When you walk into the environment where Caitlin works – a residential setting for adults with learning disabilities – you immediately notice that the work is not about following a rigid protocol. It is about the ability to read a room, to listen to what is not being said, and to understand that progress is often measured in millimetres rather than miles. It is here that Caitlin has found her true north, proving that the most profound career paths are rarely the ones we chart on the first day of university.

The Framework of Empathy

When Caitlin graduated, there was the typical, lingering pressure to step directly into a counselling practice. That was, after all, the "path." But as she sat with the reality of her skill set, she realised that the theory she had spent three years internalising was designed to be modular. It was not meant to be confined to a single room with two chairs; it was meant to be carried into the world.

"Studying counselling gave me so much more than just theory," Caitlin explains. "It taught me communication, empathy, patience, resilience, and how to really understand people. Those are skills that stay with you no matter what career you go into."

By moving into a full-time role as a support worker, Caitlin began to test the structural integrity of her degree. She found that the active listening techniques, the creation of a safe container, and the mastery of non-verbal communication were not just academic

exercises – they were essential tools for navigation. She wasn't leaving her degree behind; she was simply applying it to a different set of human variables.

A Study in Consistency

In the social care sector, the work is often invisible. It is not always about the dramatic triumph, but the patient, persistent building of trust. Caitlin recalls a resident who arrived in her care completely bed-bound and deeply withdrawn. In such a situation, there is no masterclass solution – there is only the daily work of showing up.

"It took time, consistency, and building a genuine rapport," she says. "There wasn't one specific strategy that suddenly changed things."

Caitlin's role was to be the steady constant in that resident's life. By creating an environment where they felt truly heard – a core competency of her counselling background – she watched the resident's world expand. What began as a static, isolated existence eventually blossomed into mobility, social engagement, and a newfound sense of independence.

For Caitlin, this was the moment the purpose of her degree crystallised. It wasn't about the job title on her contract; it was about the tangible change in the quality of another person's life. It was a reminder that when we view our skills as a liquid resource – adaptable and free-flowing – we can reach people in ways a rigid career path never could.

The Discipline of the Self

If the work of a support worker is the work of the heart, then the maintenance of that heart is an act of professional discipline. Like many who enter people-focused sectors, Caitlin had to learn the hard way that one cannot pour from an empty cup.

"I was reminded for three years about how important self-care is," she admits, "but it's taken until this last year to realise how truly important it is to look after yourself as well as others."

In a move that mirrors the resilience she cultivates in her residents, Caitlin turned to the road. Running became her own reset button – a physical manifestation of the discipline and endurance she brings to her professional life. In 2026, she completed the London Marathon, a feat that would have seemed inconceivable to the undergraduate who walked across the graduation stage just three years prior. The miles she logged weren't just for physical fitness; they were a mental clearing-house, a way to process the emotional weight of her work and ensure she could return to her residents with a clear head and a steady hand.

Success Reimagined

Caitlin's trajectory toward a Master's in Occupational Therapy next year is the logical next step for someone who has stopped viewing

their degree as a cage and started viewing it as a foundation. She is not switching tracks; she is compounding her interests. She is building a professional life that is as multifaceted as her own curiosity.

"I think there can sometimes be pressure at university to have your whole future planned out," she reflects. "Not ending up in the exact career linked to your degree does not mean your degree was wasted."

As Caitlin prepares for this next chapter, her advice to current students remains strikingly grounded. It is a call to intellectual agility: stay open, be patient with the uncertainty of the first post-grad year, and never underestimate the door-opening potential of a skill set that is built on humanity rather than a specific job description.



Not ending up in the exact career linked to your degree does not mean your degree was wasted.



The Classroom Compass: **Elena Caisin-Lungu**

For Elena Caisin-Lungu, a 2025 graduate of the Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training, the transition into a UK-based classroom was never just about acquiring a new credential. Having already built a career in the Republic of Moldova, where she earned both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, Elena arrived at the University Centre South Essex with a wealth of pedagogical experience. Her journey here was one of translation – not just of language, but of expertise – as she navigated the nuances of the UK education system to continue her life's work.

The Blueprint of Adaptability

In the modern ESOL classroom, versatility is the primary currency. Elena manages mixed-ability groups where the needs of learners are as diverse as their backgrounds. For her, the classroom is an environment where rigid planning must bow to human reality. When a piece of technology fails – a scenario every teacher fears – the true measure of an educator emerges.

"At one point, the smart board did not connect to the internet," Elena recalls. "I could not use my online activities. However, I always come to class with backup materials."

By seamlessly pivoting to flashcards and printed worksheets, Elena transformed a technical setback into an uninterrupted learning moment. This is the bedrock of her teaching philosophy: preparing for the unexpected so that the students never feel the friction of a glitch. By using clever differentiations, such as creating varied QR code tasks for different proficiency levels, she ensures that every learner feels empowered, regardless of their starting point.

Navigating the New

Stepping into a new role within the South Essex Colleges Group has meant balancing the "heavy lifting" of curriculum development with the complexities of college administrative systems.

As she navigates her first year, Elena is learning the art of professional sustainability. She finds that the secret to maintaining her own equilibrium lies in intentional preparation – setting aside Fridays to map out the week ahead, effectively protecting her personal time from the encroachment of Monday-morning stress.

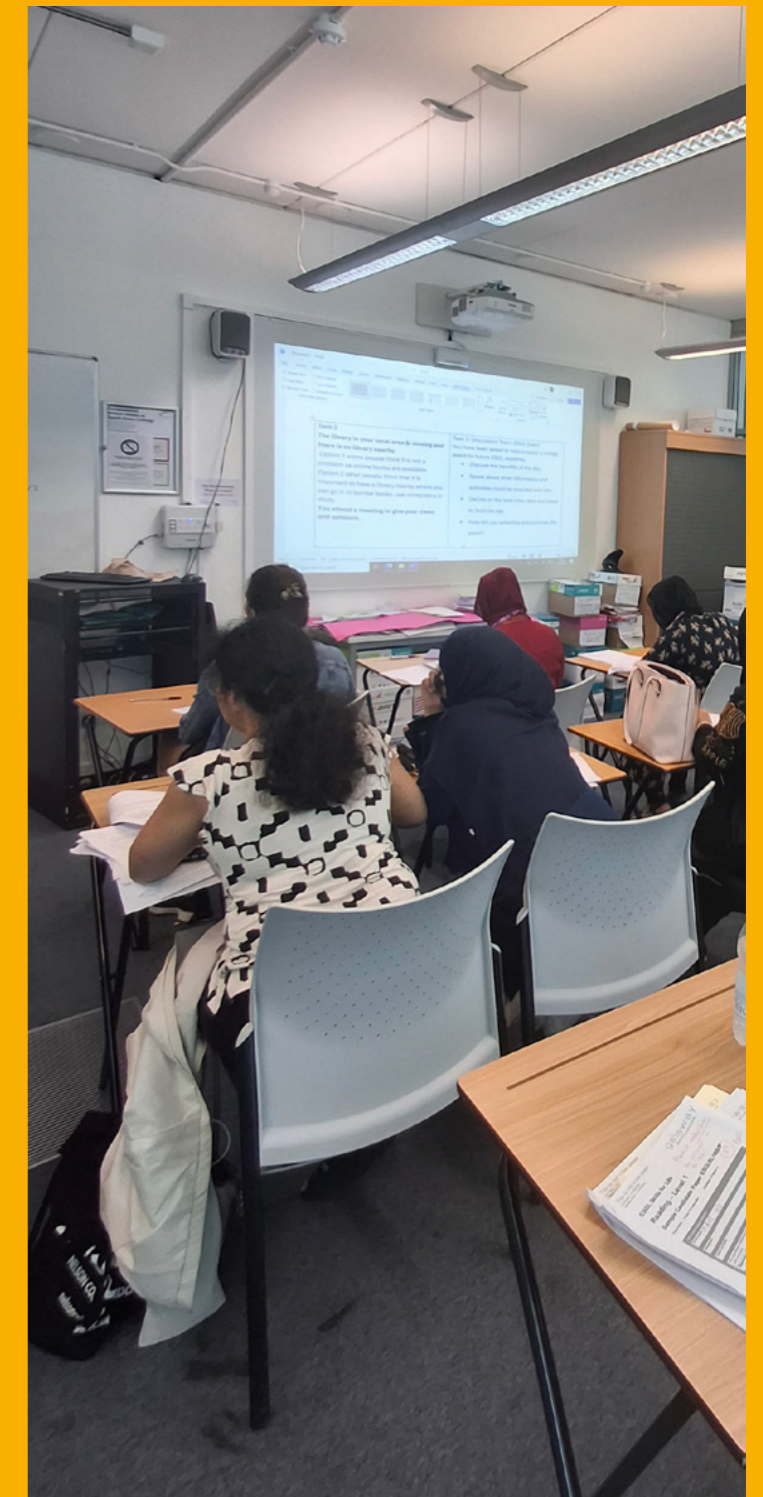
It is a process of learning to work smarter, not harder. She treats her own professional development with the same rigour she applies to her students, understanding that setting boundaries is not a lack of commitment, but a necessity for long-term excellence.

Success Beyond the Certificate

Elena's definition of success has evolved through her practice. While her qualifications are vital, she finds the true reward in the incremental growth of her students. She works with many learners who arrive in their first sessions with little or no English, often relying heavily on translation tools on their phones to bridge the communication gap. For Elena, the most meaningful victories are the moments when those learners gradually gain the confidence and language proficiency to communicate independently. These shifts represent far more than just academic progress; they are the tangible markers of the real impact of her teaching.

"Success is not only about results or certificates, but about the real impact we have on our learners," she reflects.

To those currently feeling the weight of their own training, her advice is simple: embrace the process. "Take it step by step and focus on progress, not pressure," she encourages. For Elena, the Diploma was never a finish line; it was a launchpad. She remains a perpetual student of her craft, proving that the most successful educators are those who never lose their curiosity, their patience, or their focus on the human lives they touch every day.



Take it step by step
and focus on progress,
not pressure.





The Architecture of Impact: Sophie Wade

Designing Beyond the Screen

For most graphic design graduates, the career roadmap is painted in bold, predictable strokes: agency life, branding portfolios, and the pursuit of the "big" creative account. But for Sophie Wade, a 2023 BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration graduate, the past three years have been defined by a far more fluid trajectory. Her work has moved from the glossy, high-performance world of Group Lotus to the demanding digital learning landscapes of the British Transport Police, and now, to Transport for London (TfL).

Sophie's journey is not just a collection of job titles; it is an exploration of how design can function as a tool for public equity. By stepping away from the traditional confines of "visuals-first" design, she has discovered that the most meaningful work isn't always the kind that catches the eye – it's the kind that changes how people participate in the world.

Redefining the Pivot

In the fast-paced creative sector, redundancy is often feared as a professional dead end – the moment the screen goes black. Nine months into her role at Group Lotus, Sophie found herself facing exactly that.

"It was a tricky period," she admits, "and part of me did feel like I was starting all over again."

However, her response to this transition serves as a powerful example of how to maintain momentum when the external markers of success disappear. Rather than viewing the gap as a failure, Sophie treated it as a period of consolidation. She leaned on the professional confidence instilled in her by her previous team and began to quantify her own growth. She wasn't the same designer who had walked out of university; she was more resilient, better connected, and technically more agile.

This mindset shift transformed a period of uncertainty into a bridge. When she stepped into her role at the British Transport Police, she didn't view it as a lateral move, but as an expansion of her toolkit. She applied her graphic design foundation to the world of Learning and Development, proving that a creative degree is not a narrow vocational

training, but a versatile language that can be spoken in any industry.

Accessibility as a Social Mandate

As Sophie's career has progressed into the public sector, the stakes have shifted from aesthetic excellence to social impact. At the British Transport Police, she was instrumental in realigning recruit training to meet rigorous accessibility standards (WCAG 2.1). In her current role at TfL, she manages the digital learning journeys for a massive, diverse workforce.

This environment requires a different kind of creative stamina. When your design work directly impacts public safety and inclusivity, the "always-on" nature of Agile project management can easily lead to burnout. Sophie protects her creative spark by deliberately separating her professional output from her private identity.

"TfL recently hosted a colleague art exhibition," she shares, "and I jumped at the chance to take part. It was a great opportunity to reconnect with my creative identity in a way that wasn't tied to deadlines or deliverables."

By surrounding herself with live theatre, music, and gallery visits – and by participating in non-commercial creative projects – she ensures that her inspiration remains sustainable. She has learned that the best way to serve a public-facing role is to keep the "private creative" side of her life sacred. It is this balance that allows her to return to her desk not just as a developer, but as a thoughtful, engaged individual.



Curiosity is key. Say yes to opportunities that push you outside your comfort zone – even if they don't feel like a perfect fit, you never know where they may lead.



Success as a Continuous Journey

Perhaps the most significant evolution in Sophie's journey is her shifting definition of success. Upon graduation, the pressure to "make things look good" was paramount. Three years later, that objective feels hollow compared to the satisfaction of "making things work for everyone."

"Good design isn't just about how something looks," she notes. "It's about how it feels, and how well it works for everyone."

This realisation – that her design skills can act as a catalyst for inclusion – has provided a through-line for her entire career. Her advice to current students is equally grounded. She cautions against viewing a contract or a role as a fixed "finish line." In a world where career paths are rarely linear, the most important asset a graduate can cultivate is an open mind.

"Don't feel that just because your degree is in a particular area, you can't branch out," Sophie advises. "Curiosity is key. Say yes to opportunities that push you outside your comfort zone – even if they don't feel like a perfect fit, you never know where they may lead."

Sophie Wade's career is a reminder that the path to a meaningful life is often constructed in the gaps between jobs and through the willingness to apply our skills in unexpected sectors. She didn't just find a job in graphic design; she found a way to use her talent to advocate for a more accessible world. By staying curious and refusing to tether her self-worth to a single role, she has built something far more durable than a portfolio: she has built a life that is as usable, inclusive, and impactful as the digital journeys she creates for others.

Ten Years of Craft

Inside the UCSE and RBO Partnership



For the past decade, the BA (Hons) Costume Construction programme has provided a bridge between academic study and the professional creative industries. Developed as a collaboration between University Centre South Essex and the Royal Ballet and Opera (RBO), the degree focuses on providing students with the technical foundation and professional experience required for careers in theatre and film. Central to this partnership is a shared

high-pressure projects, it is also where students test how they handle stress. Corrine Beaumont (2024) discovered that the skills she used during her degree to prepare for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Parade – managing time, working under pressure, and speaking up to solve technical problems – were directly applicable when she later moved into the legal sector.

As a Crown Court Clerk, Corrine is responsible for

Her decision to pivot was prompted by a desire to help others and work in an inclusive environment. After graduating with a first-class degree while raising two children, she concluded that she had the capacity to manage the transition. For Corrine, the move to the Crown Court was a practical choice – one that allowed her to use her experience in project management and public speaking to deliver a service she values.



Defining Success on Individual Terms

However, the programme's reach extends to those for whom the path to graduation is not a linear sprint, but a series of managed obstacles. For Lisa Dear (2024), the degree was a long-term commitment that had to be balanced against cancer treatment and full-time office work. When she initially saw the course at the Purfleet studio, she wasn't looking for a "career change" in the traditional sense; she wanted a space to develop a craft that was entirely her own.

Lisa's experience highlights that the workroom environment is not just about producing garments for a stage, but about the autonomy to pursue a skill for personal fulfilment. Even when health concerns forced her to pause her studies, the structure of the course remained a constant. She eventually returned to complete her degree, working 26 hours a week while undergoing surgery. Today, she has successfully built a practice of her own, creating commissions like an Angel Gabriel costume for a nativity, and seeing her own "Costume in Art" piece displayed at the Royal Ballet and Opera in Covent Garden. For Lisa, the success of the degree isn't measured by a job title in a theatre programme, but by the fact that she finished what she started.

This flexibility – the ability to apply technical training to a professional career, a freelance portfolio, or a personal passion project – is reflected in the career of Charley Finding (2020). As a First-Class graduate now working with WhiteStar Costume, Charley bridges the gap between the high-pressure demands of theatre and the imaginative freedom of personal creative work. Whether constructing garments for professional shows or reinterpreting designs from Starlight Express for cosplay projects, Charley treats both as essential technical exercises.

As the programme marks its tenth anniversary, these stories reveal that the value of the partnership between University Centre South Essex and the Royal Ballet and Opera is not found in a single, predictable career outcome. It is found in the way it equips individuals to turn their own interests into tangible professional outcomes. As Poppy Hillman-Crouch reflects on her experiences on the programme, her advice to new students is "not to be afraid to trust yourself and to step into your purpose and full potential". It is this trust in one's own craft that remains the most enduring result of the last ten years.

constant demand. As an in-house Cutter Maker, she now manages the full process for principal and soloist roles, including the creation of seven Ice Queen tutus and twelve Clara nightdresses for The Nutcracker. Her experience highlights a practical reality of the programme: students are encouraged to develop a professional identity and niche, transforming a general interest into a clear professional specialism.

This focus on industry-ready skills is a thread that runs through the experiences of Poppy Hillman-Crouch (2024), who now works as a freelance costume maker and wardrobe assistant at the Mercury Theatre. For Poppy, the "invaluable workroom experience" was not limited to theory; it meant learning the specific etiquette of fittings, taking measurements under pressure, and using industrial overlockers as part of a daily routine. By the time she graduated, she had already completed her work experience at the Mercury Theatre, a move that secured her a role working on everything from creature headdresses for pantomimes to film replica costumes for studio exhibitions.

For her final year tailoring unit, Poppy chose to make a 1950s RAF uniform and a Georgian riding habit, commissioning her own grandparents for the fittings. This turned an academic project into a technical challenge: she had to move beyond standardised patterns to take precise measurements and adjustments for different body types. It is this specific, hands-on problem-solving that she now relies on in the workroom at the Mercury Theatre, whether she is creating creature headdresses or handling the maintenance for a pantomime run.



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



commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that students from all backgrounds can access high-quality training and build the professional foundations for their future.

In the last edition, we highlighted this decade-long collaboration and the unique characteristics that have made it a cornerstone of our creative community. In this edition, we focus on the people behind the work, exploring how the Costume Construction environment has acted as a catalyst for professional and personal growth, and how the skills gained in the workroom continue to shape their lives after graduation.

Beyond the Workroom

If the costume workroom is defined by deadlines and

the administrative running of the courtroom, including producing court documents and multitasking during trials. She notes that the transition to the Ministry of Justice was not about starting over, but about reapplying her existing skillset. When she had no prior contacts in the legal field, she used the same resourcefulness she developed during her degree: she set up automated email alerts for job vacancies, volunteered with the Victim Support Witness Service to observe court proceedings, and joined the Junior Lawyers Division to build a new network.

"The balance and sense of stability I was looking for does not come from the environment in which I am working, but from within myself," Corrine explains.

A Direct Line to Industry

While Corrine's journey illustrates how the workroom helps develop resilience and a critical approach to creative career solutions, other graduates use this same foundation to build specialised roles within the creative industries. For these graduates, the partnership with the RBO acts as a direct pipeline into industry.

For Rachel Kidd (2023), the course served as a discovery period where she narrowed her focus to the intricate craft of tutu construction. Her transition from the classroom to the English National Ballet was not a matter of luck, but the result of specialising in a technique that remains in



Navigating the Unwritten Rules

Every university possesses a "hidden curriculum"—the implicit norms, social cues, and institutional pathways that are essential for success but rarely found in a handbook. For any student, regardless of age, the transition to higher education involves decoding these structures.

For the mature learner, this process often draws upon years of managing complex environments. For Benjamin Umeobieli, a Special Educational Needs and Disability student, the transition is a familiar challenge; having previously attended university in the early 90s, he notes that while the first year feels manageable, the intensity of the second year is where the true test of commitment lies. He balances his studies alongside work and a busy family life with four children. When reflecting on the modern tools of the trade, Benjamin offers a cautious, pragmatic perspective: "AI has its uses, but it cannot be trusted," a reminder of the critical discernment that mature students bring to their academic work.

Similarly, Tina Cook, a first-year Fine Art student balancing family responsibilities, identifies time management as a skill she has honed over a lifetime. For her, navigating university isn't about knowing everything, but about "not sweating the small stuff." This pragmatic outlook provides a steadying influence in the studio.



With age, you can understand things based on their relation to other things.



When these students act as "signposts," they help lower the barriers for their peers. By sharing how to access services or how to approach a tutor, they demystify the system. As third-year Fine Art student Sarah Connolly observes, "With age, you can understand things based on their relation to other things." This ability to contextualise information is a powerful tool. By sharing this perspective, mature students foster an environment where all learners feel more comfortable asking the questions that might otherwise remain unvoiced.



The Classroom Catalyst: Why Maturity is an Academic Asset

The modern lecture hall is a tapestry of diverse perspectives, increasingly enriched by the presence of mature students. Defined as those entering undergraduate study at age 21 or older, these learners bring with them a wealth of life experience that does more than simply add to the classroom dynamic – it transforms it. As our academic communities grow more diverse, a nuanced picture has emerged: the mature student is not merely a participant in the university landscape, but a vital catalyst for the development of the entire student body.

Recent research highlights that this cohort serves as a conduit for "life skill transmission." By bringing a blend of professional insights, vocational purpose, and seasoned resilience, mature learners create an environment where burgeoning skills can flourish across all age groups. This isn't about one group having an advantage over another; rather, it is about the power of intergenerational solidarity to elevate the collective academic experience.

Cultivating Resilience Together

Resilience – the ability to persevere through challenges – is a cornerstone of academic success. Research into "Transition Theory" suggests that mature students often enter university with a high degree of intrinsic motivation, necessitated by the "double burden" of balancing academic study with external responsibilities.

For many, this has meant developing a psychological toolkit for managing pressure. Daniel Gurner, a third-year Counselling student, describes how he learned to process challenges by "taking care of your headspace," often using exercise to clear his thoughts and return to a task with renewed focus. Similarly, Generous Muzoora notes the importance of "sitting with feelings and letting them subside," a practice she has developed over time.

These strategies – boundary setting, perspective shifting, and the proactive search for support – are not private assets; they are transferable skills. When mature students openly discuss the strength found in vulnerability, they encourage a culture where all students see the value in asking for help. As Sarah Connolly puts it, "I believe that if young people understand the strength in asking for help, it is the first step towards character building." By normalising the act of seeking assistance, the entire student cohort builds a foundation of psychological resilience that serves them long after they graduate.

Moving Towards Robust Engagement

A central tenet of the contemporary academic experience is the shift from "transactional" learning – focused on surface-level memorisation – to a "deep approach" prioritising holistic understanding. Evidence suggests that mature learners are particularly adept at this, driven by a clear vocational purpose and the ability to connect academic theory to the wider world.

This curiosity is infectious. In collaborative projects, mature students often act as mentors who invite younger peers to explore beyond the requirements of an assignment. Tina Cook finds that "teaching others is incredibly beneficial for learning things," a practice that invites collaborative discovery within the group. It is here that the concept of the "mixed-age space" becomes most transformative. When diverse cohorts work together, they engage

in a reciprocal exchange: the mature student shares their synthesis of life and work, while the younger student brings a fresh, vital curiosity to the subject matter.

A Future of Continuous Growth

The success of the mature student is a testament to the fact that it is never too late to learn. Their presence in the UK university sector is a key pillar of institutional strength, providing the intergenerational knowledge that defines a world-class education.

As we look toward the future, the goal is to formalise these informal connections. Whether through peer-mentoring schemes or project-based collaborative learning, universities have the opportunity to build spaces that value every student's journey. The "life skills" acquired during this time – the communication, the conflict resolution, and the persistent pursuit of meaning – are the true markers of a successful graduate.

For these students, their degree is not just a qualification; it is a profound reclamation of self. By fostering a community that celebrates the resilience and curiosity of every learner, we do more than teach subject matter – we prepare our students for a lifetime of adaptation and growth. As Dan Gurner reflects, finding meaning in the journey is what truly matters. In the end, it is this shared sense of purpose that turns a classroom into a community, and a group of students into a lifelong network of peers.



Systemic Barriers and the Self-Agency Engine: Sophie Andrews-Tilbury

In the landscape of social psychology, the concept of a "level playing field" is often more theoretical than practical. For Sophie Andrews-Tilbury, a third-year Psychology and Sociology undergraduate at University Centre South Essex, this disparity is the focal point of her academic inquiry. Her dissertation, *Barriers to Success*, investigates how the absence of foundational family support systems dictates long-term educational and professional outcomes. Yet, for Andrews-Tilbury, this research is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is an interrogation of the structural inequalities that shape human potential, and a study of the mechanisms individuals employ to navigate them.

The core of her research addresses a sobering sociological reality: the "starting line" for success is rarely uniform. Andrews-Tilbury points to the visual metaphor of the "privilege race" – a social experiment where participants take steps forward based on systemic advantages that have nothing to do with personal effort. "Research demonstrates that children from supportive family relationships have a higher statistical chance of success," she explains. "My work explores what happens when that scaffold is missing, and how resilience – though often romanticised – is frequently a necessity born of inequity rather than a choice."

Developing the Internal Engine

For students navigating higher education without traditional support structures, the

challenge is twofold: they must meet academic demands while simultaneously managing the exhaustion of self-advocacy. Andrews-Tilbury's journey at UCSE was defined by a shift from external reliance to an internal "engine" of self-agency.

"I didn't let anything stop me," she reflects. "I had to learn how to identify what I needed, which meant asking for support and advocating for my own accessibility." This process led to her formal screenings for ADHD and dyslexia, a move that allowed her to recalibrate her study habits to fit her neurodivergent needs. However, she is quick to note that self-agency does not mean self-isolation. She credits a peer – a friend named Crystal, who navigated similar hurdles to reach the final stages of teacher training – as a crucial mirror. "They believed in me when I didn't. That had a ripple effect and made me realise that caring about my own outcome was not an act of selfishness, but a necessary discipline."

Resilience and the Rituals of Rest

Studying systemic barriers is emotionally taxing, as the research inherently validates the weight of the challenges the researcher may be personally experiencing. To prevent this work from becoming a cycle of burnout, Andrews-Tilbury has had to develop specific "rituals of rest" and a philosophy of redirected energy.

She describes a practice of "transformative energy" – taking the friction caused by systemic setbacks and redirecting it into academic or

interpersonal momentum. "I learned to use the energy from setbacks to turn them around in any way possible," she says. "There is support available, even when it isn't immediately accessible. I find that I feel most complete when I am actively helping my friends navigate their own hurdles. It reminds me that wellbeing isn't just internal; it's a shared infrastructure."

Success as a Collective and Individual Act

As Andrews-Tilbury approaches graduation, her definition of personal success has evolved. It is no longer about reaching a distant, idealised destination, but about the incremental process of "just keeping swimming." She notes that her research consistently showed that one person or one event – an unexpected moment of support or a pivot in perspective – could alter the trajectory of an entire life.

To a student currently feeling the weight of these systemic barriers, her advice is grounded in the reality of her own difficult second year. "You can't look back, or you get stuck in the loop," she cautions. "Realise who you are, what you want, and care about yourself enough to push through. It's not just about what is thrown at us; it's about how we handle it. We grow our self-identity through these barriers. It isn't easy, but the feeling of accomplishment – the realisation of where you are today compared to where you started – is worth every step."

Ultimately, Andrews-Tilbury's work suggests that while we cannot dismantle every systemic barrier alone, we can master the internal mechanics of our own navigation. Success, in her view, is not the absence of obstacles, but the ability to recognise them, name them, and build the community required to move through them, one step at a time.



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Bridging the Gap: Literacy, Mentorship & Community

In the pursuit of educational equity, the "starting line" is rarely the same for every child. Research indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face significant hurdles to progression that are not tied to ability, but to access. At University Centre South Essex (UCSE), a specialised reading scheme – developed by Widening Participation Manager Rachael Glover and HE Outreach Co-ordinator Rebecca Brazzo – seeks to address this by

fostering early engagement with literacy through a robust model of student-led mentorship. Inspired by evidence-based frameworks pioneered by institutions such as Bournemouth University, this programme transforms reading from an isolated academic task into a collaborative community project.

for families who may not have previously viewed it as an accessible path.

"We are extremely proud of the work our students have been doing," says Rachael Glover. "Our ambassadors are a vital part of the many projects we run with local schools, and it's wonderful to see them using their own skills and experience to inspire the next generation to dream big and reach their goals."

This sense of community is also a powerful driver for the mentors themselves. Scott notes that the programme has been instrumental in her own professional growth, allowing her to work alongside SENCOs and English leads, building a professional network while contributing to her local neighbourhood. "Due to living in the area, I often see the children I read with walking home from school," Scott shares. "They tell me about how many pages they have read. It shows me they are beginning to love reading."

Expanding Horizons

The initiative is part of a wider institutional mission to ensure that every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, has an equal opportunity to progress. Alongside the reading scheme, Rebecca Brazzo is collaborating with the Aspire Project, utilising the SACU programme to

introduce Year 9 students to career possibilities and higher education pathways.

The success of these initiatives is measured by the children's own reflection on their growing confidence and passion. By fostering these links, UCSE is not just supporting early literacy; it is creating a continuum of engagement that bridges the gap between primary education and potential higher education outcomes.

For the UCSE students involved, the project serves as a cornerstone of their own professional development, often leading to placements and job offers. It is a testament to the idea that resourcefulness – when applied to community-based work – yields benefits that far exceed the individual. By investing in the literacy and aspirations of local schoolchildren, UCSE is demonstrating that an institution is most successful when it is deeply woven into the fabric of the community it serves. As Brazzo highlights, understanding the possibilities available is fundamental to the project's success, ensuring that for the families and children involved, the world remains an accessible, encouraging, and limitless space.

The Mentorship Model

At the heart of this initiative are UCSE student mentors. Historically drawn from Early Years disciplines, the scheme is now expanding across all undergraduate faculties, providing students with critical exposure to professional teaching environments. Each mentor is paired with up to eight primary school pupils, tasked not merely with "teaching," but with cultivating a genuine passion for the written word.

For Molly Scott, a final-year student who has participated in the scheme for the duration of her degree, the process required a significant shift in professional approach. "I worked alongside children who either did not enjoy reading or lacked access to resources at home," Scott explains. "I quickly had to adapt my approach. I didn't want to overwhelm them. Instead, I introduced myself in environments they chose, like the school library, and took the time to listen to their interests."

By prioritising trust and relationship-building – engaging in catch-ups about the children's weeks before even opening a book – Scott found that the act of reading became a shared interest rather than an academic requirement. This method reflects the programme's core philosophy: literacy is a social practice. When mentors demonstrate that they value the child's perspective, the "barrier" to reading begins to dissolve.

Building a Civic Infrastructure

The scheme's impact extends far beyond the classroom, functioning as a vital link between higher education and the local community. The programme culminates in a celebration event that brings together parents, school staff, children, and local independent book retailers. By providing children with books of their own and certificates from a university, the event serves a dual purpose: it validates the children's achievements and demystifies higher education



Building Inclusive Career Journeys in Essex

The transition into employment is a complex process that requires more than just technical qualification; it requires a match between an individual's strengths and the specific demands of a role. While conventional recruitment methods are designed to assess large volumes of candidates efficiently, they can sometimes miss the nuance of an individual's potential, particularly when communication styles or working environments do not align with traditional expectations. Within the local region, organisations such as Essex Cares Limited (ECL) and Employ-Ability are playing a vital role in evolving this process. By acting as a bridge between candidates and employers, they help identify how diversity – whether neurodivergent, disability-related, or mental health-focused – can be integrated into a business's operational strengths.

For these providers, the objective is not to overhaul the labour market, but to expand the definition of a "successful fit." Through a resourceful, person-centred approach, they help both candidates and employers find common ground – understanding that productivity, routine, and professional growth are often best supported when the individual's environment, communication style, and pace are thoughtfully aligned with the needs of the business.

ECL: Redefining the "Fit"

ECL's mission is rooted in the conviction that independence is a fundamental human requirement, regardless of an individual's support needs. In sectors like construction and logistics – environments often characterised by high-pressure, boisterous cultures – ECL's Inclusive Employment Specialists act as architects of access.

"These sectors rely on routine, reliability, and practical problem-solving – strengths that align closely with many neurodivergent candidates," explains Abbey Meech, Supported Internship Team Manager at ECL. The barrier, Meech notes, is rarely the work itself; it is the recruitment gatekeeping. To bypass this, ECL shifts the focus

from the static CV to the active experience. By organising "taster days," they allow both employer and candidate to bypass the anxiety of a formal interview and observe real-time capability and cultural compatibility.

This approach was pivotal for Ben, a candidate with a deep passion for horticulture. Despite his qualifications and volunteer experience, his search for work had been met with silence. When ECL connected him with Sailship – a local charity in Clacton-on-Sea – the organisation prioritised his comfort over standard procedure. Recognising that a high-pressure interview would obscure Ben's true abilities, the director moved the conversation outside, shifting the dynamic from a test to a dialogue. Ben's subsequent success is a testament to the fact that when the barrier is removed, the candidate's competence remains. For ECL, success is not merely "placing" a person; it is about creating a sustained professional identity where the individual thrives on their own terms.

Employ-Ability: The IPS Model of Agility

While ECL focuses on unlocking potential through practical adaptation, Employ-Ability provides a specialised lifeline for those experiencing mental ill health. Operating under the "Individual Placement and Support" (IPS) model, they reject the traditional "train then place" philosophy, which often leaves vulnerable candidates behind. Instead, they champion "place-then-train," an agile approach that integrates mental health support into the daily rhythm of work.

"The bespoke nature of IPS means we work to the individual," says Lucy Hogg, IPS Employment Specialist Team Lead. "We build ready-to-work plans that start with a person's strengths and preferences, ensuring these are integrated into the job search rather than managed as an afterthought."

For Employ-Ability, work is not a separate sphere from wellbeing; it is a pillar of it. However, this is only possible if the environment is sustainable.

By engaging employers early – agreeing to phased starts, flexible hours, or job carving – Hogg's team ensures that employment provides routine and purpose without triggering the crises that often result from high-pressure, inflexible environments.

A Collective Approach to Sustained Success

Both ECL and Employ-Ability demonstrate that personal success is rarely a solitary pursuit. Whether it is through ECL's disability confidence training for local businesses or Employ-Ability's partnership with the NHS (EPUT), these organisations are cultivating a community-wide infrastructure that values neurodiversity and mental health.

For current undergraduates and recent graduates from University Centre South Essex navigating the transition into the workforce, the lessons are clear. The pressure to "leap" into a high-powered career can be paralyzing, particularly for those facing invisible barriers. The alternative, according to both organisations, is to reframe the journey.

"Lower the pressure and start with small, manageable steps," suggests Hogg. "A conversation with a specialist, an informational interview, or a low-pressure volunteer role can build the momentum necessary to move forward."

This ethos of "slow, steady progress over quick wins" is the most resourceful tool a graduate can possess. For the autistic or neurodivergent job seeker, Meech offers a final, vital perspective: "View your lived experience as an asset, not a hindrance. Your resilience, unique perspective, and problem-solving skills add value to a business."

Ultimately, the work of ECL and Employ-Ability reveals that the most inclusive workplaces are not those that ignore the challenges of their employees, but those that design their structures to support them. As these local providers continue to challenge misconceptions and bridge the gap between exclusion and opportunity, they remind us that the truly sustainable career is one built on a foundation of dignity, support, and the courage to be transparent about one's needs. For any graduate standing at the threshold of their career, the most resourceful step is to recognise that they do not have to build that bridge alone.



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Get involved with our Student Collective Groups

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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)

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

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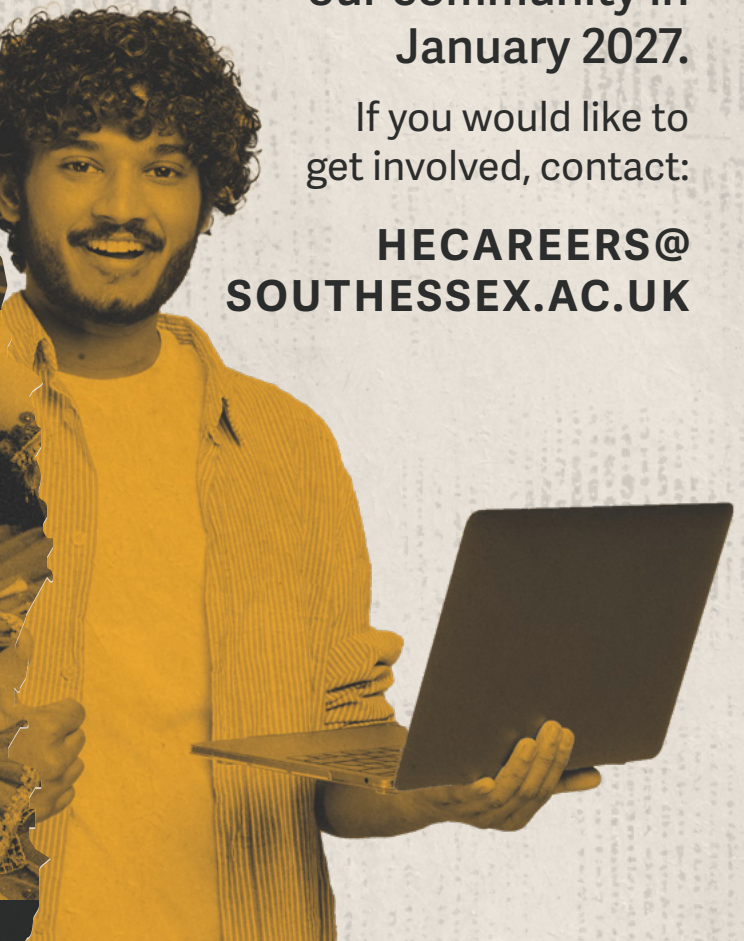
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