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## It's Going to Be O.K.: Thoughts and Recollections After a Year at University

### Abstract

Matthew Currie is a first-generation undergraduate student from Durham University studying BA Modern Languages and Cultures. In this article, Currie describes his life since receiving his A Level results and starting university, discussing the challenges that he has faced and how he has coped with them. Currie concludes by reflecting on this period of ten months with the message: “it’s going to be ok,” one which he hopes will resonate with his first-gen readers.

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MATTHEW CURRIE

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## It's Going to Be O.K.: Thoughts and Recollections After a Year at University

If you had told me ten months ago that I was going to be in the place I am today, I would have laughed in your face. I had spent the past two years of my life working towards my A Levels<sup>1</sup> and I was nervously waiting for my results and wondering what my future was going to be like. When I opened my results envelope on that cold August morning, panic hit me. I had not achieved the exact grades required for my offer to Durham University: three A grades. My results made me think that I would be going to my Insurance University.<sup>2</sup> It was only after confirming with my Head of Sixth Form that I was able to finally relax. I had, somehow, got into Durham.

Another setback came later that day, however, while I was sat in a coffee shop with my mum. I received a text message from the only other person from my Sixth Form who had applied to Durham telling me that he hadn't got in due to an unfortunate result. It was a shame to hear, as this meant that I was going to be starting university alone. I did know one other person who had got into Durham, but we both agreed that it would be better to branch out and make our own friends rather than spend all our time together.

A month of preparing for university then passed, with feelings of nervousness and apprehension continuing to rise and hit me. This continued even after I started the car journey to Durham. Was I going to be ok? Would I fit in? Would I make any friends?

Upon arriving at Stephenson College, I knew that I had made the right choice of college to spend my years at Durham in.<sup>3</sup> I was welcomed by everyone I met, which made me immediately feel at ease. When my parents left me later that day after the obligatory university bedroom photoshoot for Facebook, my nervousness returned. I was on my own for the first time in my life—how was I going to cope and fend for myself? I decided to throw myself into Freshers Week,<sup>4</sup> and this certainly helped to reassure me. As someone who doesn't drink much alcohol, it was great to see that the Freshers Week activities weren't drinking-based, and it was

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<sup>1</sup> In British education, A Levels are exams that are taken, usually in three or four subjects, at the end of your last two years of formal education (often referred to as Sixth Form and/or College). I took three A Levels: German, Maths, and History.

<sup>2</sup> In the UK university application system, you have to apply for up to five universities through UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). After receiving offers from the universities you have applied for, you then have to choose a Firm University (the university you will go to if you get the A Level Results that it requires) and an Insurance University (the university you will go to if you don't meet the exact grades for your Firm University, providing you achieved the grades required for that university). When I applied to university, my 'Firm' was Durham.

<sup>3</sup> A College at Durham University (not to be confused with the term Sixth Form College, as in footnote 1 above) is a smaller subsection of the university community that has its own identity, traditions, and events. When I applied to Durham, Stephenson College was my first choice College.

<sup>4</sup> In the UK, Freshers Week is a week of activities before the official university term starts where you will get to know people, the university and what the place you are living in is like.

also good to see that there was “Tea and Toast” events<sup>5</sup> for those who didn’t want to participate in club nights.

Ten months after receiving my A Level results, I am looking back on my first year at university from my current perspective. I study a degree I have genuine passionate for.<sup>6</sup> I have a job for the first time in my life. I have a wonderful circle of friends. Throughout the last year, there were numerous moments where I wish I could have told myself “It’s going to be ok. You can do this.” From applying to and successfully achieving a place on a DAAD scholarship<sup>7</sup> to working behind the bar on the last half of “Stevo Day,”<sup>8</sup> my first year of university certainly hasn’t been easy. I am proud of the fact that I have managed to cope.

It turned out that my first year at university was ‘ok,’ and that I really was ‘able to do this.’ This year has definitely been made more challenging by the fact that I am a first-generation scholar—I am not going to deny this. There are moments throughout the year that would have been much easier had I had the knowledge or the ability to better navigate the university. But I have managed. I have coped.

To those of you in a similar situation to where I was ten months ago, I hope that my article has alleviated at least some of your nervousness and preconceptions about going to university as a first-generation scholar. If you ever feel overwhelmed, take a step back, breathe, and think. Keep calm. You can do this. Your first year at university will be ok.

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<sup>5</sup> The “Tea and Toast” events were a quiet place separate from the main events that were going on that night where you could talk to other people and also have tea, toast, crisps (chips), and often a lot of biscuits (cookies).

<sup>6</sup> I study BA Modern Languages and Cultures – post A-Level German and Beginners Spanish.

<sup>7</sup> The DAAD, German Academic Exchange Service, is a worldwide organisation that promotes the study of German abroad. If you successfully achieve a place on a DAAD scholarship, you will spend a period of time studying at a German university, taking part in language classes and cultural modules while also experiencing the city you are living in. I achieved a place on the University of Freiburg’s *German Language and Culture in March, August and September* course to spend the majority of August 2024 studying in Freiburg. Applying to this scholarship was a challenge, not least because I had to write a letter of motivation in German and also complete the hardest German language test I’ve ever done.

<sup>8</sup> After exam season finishes in Durham, each college has a “College Day” (a day of celebration that often involves things like music performances, inflatables, and food trucks), with Stephenson’s College Day affectionately known as “Stevo Day.” Each College’s Bar is also open throughout the College Day and is extremely busy and therefore quite challenging to work, but also a very rewarding experience. I worked for nearly seven hours on Stevo Day, serving countless customers and also helping to close down the bar when the day finished. I will never forget the feeling of pride and satisfaction that I felt when I finished that shift.