



Well, this isn't the job I signed up for...

By Ms Catherine Whalley — Thursday, 11 June 2020

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That's what I think at least once every day at the moment. So many of the things that I love about College life have changed.

Hearing music emanate from the Chapel... I used to hear all sorts of things floating through the window of my office, especially in the summer. Sometimes it was what you would expect, like Andrej or Stanley practising a good bit of Bach on the organ, or the choir singing psalms in preparation for Evensong. But sometimes it will be Joe or Felix playing the trombone (goodness me, the sound of a trombone carries a long way out of Chapel when practised at full volume). One memorable evening last term, it was one of the Strauss Wind Serenades, including Branwen amongst the four French horns. Now my soundtrack is Radio 3, but thankfully I still get to hear some Bach (even if it is only in the 'Bach before 7' slot each morning).

Sausages and hash browns for breakfast... I wish I could be popping up to breakfast to see who's in sub fusc ready for the walk to the Exam Schools. But the downside of that joy was that it used to be followed by the slightly anxious wait between 9.30am and 9.45am in case the phone rang, with Ailsa or Matt from the Exam Schools enquiring gently about the whereabouts of someone who should have already been writing for 15 minutes! It didn't actually happen very often – but the fear that the call might come hung over me six days a week for many weeks each Trinity term...

Saying hello to the Porters every day... What an important part of the day that is! Occasionally following by Paul beckoning and starting 'You might just want to know that...' followed by some piece of news that might affect my next five minutes, my next hour, my next week, or (once or twice) the next year or so, on and off.



Fixing little problems... One of the highlights of my first few months at College was getting people new University cards. I know it sounds stupid. But it was so pleasing. People would turn up at my door expecting it to be a really big palaver to get a new card. And it wasn't. In a few days, they would have their new card. None of the credit was actually mine – it was due to the marvellous efficiency of the team in the University Card Office. Nonetheless, coming from a role in the central University where it felt like I grappled all day with challenges that were mostly large-scale and somewhat intractable, the joy of giving people what they wanted was real. But hardly anyone has asked for a new University card for months.

To be fair, some of the irritating things have stopped too...

'What's the dress code for dinner tonight?'... There's only so many times I can answer that question on the day of a big dinner before giving in to petty frustration and pinning a notice to my door answering each of the questions I predict I will get asked more than three times that day...

And I've learnt some new skills. I've worked out how to chair a meeting of 30 colleagues, all from different colleges, online. And how to make a video of myself. OK, it took about 25 takes and was totally excruciating. But I'm glad I persevered. And I've learnt to appreciate what a luxury being able to work uninterrupted is (and confirmed that Primary School teacher would not have been a wise career choice for me). On the other hand, my daughter, Rebecca, has reviewed video tours with me, had regular chats with the Master (complete with cuddly toy conversations), and managed to draw pictures of super-heroes while I have catch-ups with my team. But when she comes with me to College on our weekly visits, I know she thinks it all feels too quiet too. Because most of all I miss...



Seeing students... I drink a lot of coffee. I did in College. And I definitely am still doing so now. But when in College, having an empty coffee cup also meant the chance to stroll from Besse to the SCR and back, seeing who I bumped into on the way. The resulting conversations, where one asked Christy about the latest swimming fixture, or Declan about the next concert, or happened to bump into a student who had popped in with a problem the previous week, or found another who had been clearly avoiding replying to a simple question in an email, are what I miss.

And I really – weirdly – miss the sense of living through the stressful bits of Finals with students. While there are some students who I barely get to know, there are others, particularly those faced with challenging situations, often not of their own making, who become very well known to me. And I love the feeling of knowing when it is their last exam, and breathing a big sigh of relief both for them and with them. I'm still doing that, but it isn't the same at a distance. It's being part of a real community that makes my job what I love, and I long for the day that we're all back together again.

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