James Weston, BSc Geology

What are you currently doing and who are you working for? Can you give a brief description of what you did from graduation up to now?

At present I am working for the construction and infrastructure company Morgan Sindall as a graduate Site Engineer within their infrastructure division. I'm currently working on a project for Severn Trent Water installing new clean water pipelines in the Gloucestershire region as a response to the severe flooding that hit the area in 2007, that cut off water supplies to several parts of the region.

After graduating in 2007, I immediately went and worked for Morgan=Est (the previous name of Morgan Sindall) in Croydon, South London - working on a 12km, 3.0m internal diameter cable tunnel for National Grid. I took a break from working for Morgan=Est in April 2008, and travelled around the world for 11 months which included 2 months in Ecuador's section of the Amazon rainforest for conservation work. I rejoined the tunnel project in late 2008. Due to the recession I went back to the University of Birmingham in September 2009, part sponsored by Morgan=Est, and completed an MSc in Geotechnical Engineering and Management in December 2010. In June 2011 I once again rejoined Morgan Sindall in London on a tunnelling project in Whitechapel - a 7km, 2.4m internal diameter tunnel for UK Power Networks. I stayed in tunnelling until April 2012 where I then transferred to clean water pipelines.

Can you give a short outline of the course you studied at the University of Birmingham and how it benefited you?

I spent 3 years on a BSc Geology course from September 2004 to June 2007. During the three years, the course consisted of numerous modules such as Geophysics and Mineralogy to Petroleum Geology and Structural Geology. This also meant undertaking numerous field work trips, and an independent project that involved spending 6 weeks in mid-Wales mapping the geology that is present there.

Ultimately the course gave me a much broader and in-depth understanding of how the world works and why we are here today, as well as the importance of geology to modern day life. I decided that I wanted to combine the skills I gained from Geology with the experience I had gained from working in the civil engineering field, which led to my MSc in Geotechnical Engineering. Without my knowledge of geology the course would have been quite complex and difficult, and I believe a big factor of my success in both courses is down the high level of teaching by lecturers at the University of Birmingham and the constant support they provide.

How did you find your first year in Birmingham?

Initially I found it quite difficult as I grew up in quite a remote rural environment, and so I had never experienced living in a busy, urban environment for such long periods of time. Of course homesickness was present at the beginning, but as clichéd as it sounds, the university is a very friendly and welcoming place. On my first day I had some bank account problems, and whilst waiting for the bank to correct the fault I had little or no money for the first few days. But one of the first people I met on my course willingly loaned me money despite only knowing me for half an hour or so. And whenever I think of the University this is one of the first thoughts that enters my mind. Needless to say we are still friends today, almost 8 years later. My fondness for the university grew throughout the year, and was confirmed when I came back 2 years later after graduating from my MSc.

How did going to University benefit you?

As mentioned I came from quite a remote rural environment, and I was quite shy and reserved when I first came to university. Whilst still taking part in events and nights out, I wasn't outgoing and confident in a lot of things. This all changed after the first year at Birmingham University which was noted by all my family and friends back home. By the end of second year I was a lot more confident, outgoing, and engaging and was organising events myself rather than following the crowd. I believe I would have become like this without university life, but it would have taken a long time, whereas university life brought this out much quicker. Support from the university backed this up, and this helped me obtain a job immediately after graduating from my degree.

How about campus life? Can you describe how it was to study here at Edgbaston Campus rather than in a City Centre location?

I can't compare the two as I never engaged in city centre learning, but the idea never appealed to me in the first place. The brilliant part of campus life is that everything is there in one place, and always available. For example, when exam time came up and revision was needed, the library was open 24 hours and resources were no more than a few hundred metres away. This saved a lot of time and effort with looking for revision material or resources and a lot more time concentrating on revision. Meetings with lecturers could also be planned, if necessary, last minute, and it was easy to see if they were available rather than travelling the distance to your department. Because I travel past the University quite often, and still have friends working/studying there I have seen the recent improvements made around the campus such as University Centre and The Guild and it looks even more appealing to study there.

How did you find living in Birmingham? Was it how you expected it to be? Have you found the student community here supportive?

The student community I found to be very supportive. Even though I didn't use most of the services myself, I was well aware of what was available, such as Student Counselling amongst others. I remember my first impression of University life on campus as it being large and confusing but this soon dissipated with the welcoming atmosphere, which is why I came back for my MSc.

I enjoyed living in Birmingham so much that I have settled here and work nearby so I can commute from Birmingham. Despite working in London briefly, I maintained accommodation in Birmingham and came back every weekend. In total I have lived in Birmingham for nearly 8 years since first coming to University.

Did you join any student societies or take part in any events?

I joined a couple of societies such as RockSoc and FilmSoc, as well as Lapsoc for my Geology department. I undertook many of the events these societies hosted, especially any events that the Geology department provided, in order to fully integrate myself with University life in my first year. I continued to attend these events in my second and third years.

Any tips or words of wisdom that you would like to pass on to other students thinking of coming to study here?

I know everyone says it, but your days at university really can be some of the best of your life, and the friends you make during those years are often friends that you will keep for the rest of your life. Get yourself out there and make the first move in making new friends, everyone is in the same boat and feeling the same way. Don't be afraid to get a part-time job if you need the money. Many companies are really flexible in their rotas, especially restaurants, and because of the shift patterns they operate, they often rely on students. Plus they're a great addition to your social life in making new friends, combined with extra money!

What are your aspirations for the future?

My career aspirations are to get into the Geotechnical sector after I've spent the last few years gaining on-site experience, and hopefully to obtain a consultancy/design role. I actually have an interview with Mott McDonald next week for a role on their Geotechnical division so this could be the first step. After that my next aim is to complete a chartership.

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