Posted on Friday 8th November 2013

By Emily, our Chemistry Events Correspondent

As an undergraduate chemistry student, I'm very used to people making the assumption that all I do for my degree is play around with Bunsen burners; however, this isn't quite the whole picture. Yes, in my first year at the University of Birmingham I spent countless hours in labs trying to synthesise a pure compound, or determine the density of a gaseous sample, but there's much more to the chemistry course. I've had the opportunity to engage in educated discussion with academics and students alike from a variety of backgrounds, and in my free time been able to explore the city of Birmingham. I have also formed a close bond with my cohort, who are as interesting and vibrant a collection of young people as you could hope to find anywhere. This is of course greatly enriching personally, but it has also broadened my understanding of the subject, teaching me that there are many different ways of approaching a problem. First class lecturers are another benefit of studying at Birmingham, as speaking to someone who is working on cutting-edge projects and collaborating with other chemists worldwide can really help to further your own understanding.

When I first came to university, I was apprehensive to say the least. With little experience in studying science (I had a fairly unconventional set of A Levels) and no knowledge of maths past GCSE level, I felt that I had a lot of catching up to do. Thankfully, I wasn't the only one in that position, and found that the range of academic backgrounds in my course was far broader than I expected. Not to say that facing calculus for the first time wasn't daunting, but at least I wasn't on my own doing it! Above all, I was excited to be starting so many new topics, and I was not disappointed. The course itself has been highly fulfilling, allowing me to explore new areas of the subject that were never made available to me before. The topics covered in degree level chemistry are far more engaging than the material taught at lower levels. At school, I found the way the sciences were simplified, with the aim being to learn merely enough to pass the exam, infuriating, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one. I was forever quizzing my weary teachers on why things worked in the way they did, but they were reluctant to stray from the syllabus. Finally, at university I'm encouraged to do independent research and to actually expand my knowledge in a current field with practical applications. This is far more satisfying than school – although, it seems that every new theory or process I learn about, opens doors to a myriad of new questions to be answered.

University life offers limitless extracurricular activities for anyone with the initiative to get involved – and I would wholeheartedly encourage any first years to do so! With around 200 active student groups, there is something for everyone. For the first time in my life I've found myself having to turn down opportunities, due to the sheer number available; I am, though, happy with what I've chosen. My outreach work in particular has been a thoroughly rewarding endeavour, giving me the chance to communicate my passion for the sciences to others. Alongside one of my lecturers, I have carried out interactive chemistry demonstrations for children, which is demanding, but gratifying. Attending university allowed me to become involved in this work, and, in doing so, it has not just allowed me to study, but also to promote engagement in the subject I'm passionate about.