

Jane

What subjects did you study prior to arriving in Durham?

I studied the usual at A Level: History, English Literature, English Language, Maths and General Studies but I read (and continue to read) widely around all subjects. I wish I'd studied Economics – it's more crucial to understanding history than I realised when choosing subjects aged 16.



What were the highlights of studying at Durham?

Building my confidence – which I did through great interactions with the history faculty teachers (obviously) and fellow students, but also by editing the student paper, Palatinate, and being Secretary, then President, of the History Society. My closest friends are still those I met at Durham. I was too straight-laced to have 'highlights' that involve the bar or wild partying – and I'm okay with that.

What was the topic of your third-year dissertation?

I examined the media portrayal of (UK/US/Allied) atrocities during the Korean, Vietnam and 1991 Gulf Wars. It taught me a lot about the media and how news was gathered, analysed and selected for dissemination to the public. Critical thinking was crucial. There is a lot we can learn for today: one Tweet is not a 'source': look for a minimum of two independent sources, cross-reference, and analyse everything.

What are you doing now and how did your degree help prepare you?

I am the British High Commissioner (the same as an Ambassador, but in a Commonwealth Country) to Kenya. I've been the Ambassador to Yemen, Acting Ambassador to Iran and also worked in the US, Iraq and Afghanistan.

I didn't realise at the time how vital my degree was to my work: a history degree teaches you the ability to be able to get through large quantities of information, understand the importance of sourcing (a first hand account should carry considerable weight compared to the 19th Century equivalent of a Twitter rumour), cross-reference sources, analyse the information to separate fact from fiction and perceived fact; see the same issue from multiple angles (emotional intelligence important), understand motivations of individuals, societies and countries and the fact that the issue in front of you is shaped by a range of other issues below the surface, distil the above into an understandable synopsis and the ability to make coherent arguments. These are essentially the basic skills for diplomats, intelligence officers, policy makers, journalists and a whole array of other careers.

For those interested in diplomacy, I joined the Civil Service Fast Stream, initially in the Cabinet Office (the department that co-ordinates Whitehall policy) and then moved to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Nowadays, it is usual for graduates to have done another job first or worked overseas, coming to us in their late 20s. Many of them have tried for the Fast Stream two or three times before getting in. Being well rounded and able to work well with others is essential.