

Student Article

‘Welcome to the Bubble’

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‘Welcome to the Bubble’ was the first phrase I heard in Saint Andrews. It was my first day, and I had no idea either what ‘the Bubble’ meant, nor how exactly Saint Andrews looked. Being very curious about the place where I was planning to spend five years, I had done some research prior to coming. I learned that it is a tiny city, with only three streets, one of which has Starbucks on it. The University has a high percentage of international students, is high in the ranking of student satisfaction, and has more than 100 societies. All these facts, especially the existence of Starbucks, sounded very intriguing and promising and I was looking forward to finding out what made the student satisfaction rate so high and after all, how the University had managed to attract Prince William. Having grown up in a city with a population of over 7 million, Saint Petersburg, I was apprehensive about such a radical change from a megalopolis to a small town, or as my friends like to joke about it, a ‘village’ with three streets. However, after living in Saint Andrews for one academic year, I can confidently say that my fear was not justified and it is possible to keep yourself entertained and even have the best four or, in my case, five years in your life. Given that many UK universities are located in university towns and share a lot in common with Saint Andrews, my experience of moving to a new country for my undergraduate studies can be helpful for other students considering doing the same.

So what is it that makes thousands of students from all over the world come to St Andrews for their undergraduate studies? Of course, the most straightforward answer is its academic excellence. However, being a student myself and having talked to many other students about it, I can be certain that it is by no means the only factor in choosing a university. If you have to spend 4 or even more years in a different country, you will take into account much more than just the level of education offered by a university. In my opinion, it is the unique traditions of Saint Andrews that attract international students to it and make the years they spend here among the most memorable of their lives. While I am familiar only with the traditions of Saint Andrews, I am sure that each British university has its unique traditions, which allows students to fully engage with the university.

Since I had not been to St Andrews, in fact, not even to Scotland before, I had to explore all these traditions myself in my foundation year. The first tradition that I became familiar with was the Sunday Pier Walk, one of the oldest traditions of Saint Andrews. This tradition involves wearing red gowns and walking to the pier on a Sunday morning. Its description might not sound so exciting, but it is truly one of the most important community-creating events. When you meet hundreds of other students all wearing gowns in St Salvator's Quad, founded in 1450, and you all walk to the pier together, you realise how significant this tradition is for the entire university. It is one of the unifying forces of Saint Andrews which connects foundation students with the PhDs, and the local people with students who have just arrived. It is one of the events where your age, country of origin or degree do not matter; all that matters is that you are part of Saint Andrews. The Pier Walk is just a specific example of this tradition in Saint Andrews, in other universities it might be any student processions that attract a significant number of people. In my opinion, these events are a great way for international students to make friends and feel part of the university community.

Another major tradition of Saint Andrews which is present in many universities is the organization of balls. Here a ball is just a large party, very often with a dinner at the beginning. The balls are so popular among the students that there is almost a competition between different societies for the status of 'the best ball of the year'. They are organised by all kinds of societies from the LGBT society to the Society of Neuroscience and Psychology. Each ball has its own theme and attracts members as well as non-members of the society. This means that you can come with the people you already know from the society and meet more at the ball. Similar to the Pier Walk, balls attract all kinds of students and suit any interests by differing in location, theme, dress code and type of music. At these kinds of events I, personally, forget that I am an international student and feel like I am at home, celebrating something with my old friends from school. Therefore, the balls and any other dance dance events play a major part in international students' integration experience by allowing them to further establish their relations with their friends from societies or classes and make new friends.

The last tradition that I would like to talk about is the academic family. This term might sound very studious and you might picture strict, mature students serious about their classes, who are appointed to look after freshers. That is the image that I had at the beginning of the year. However, contrary to my expectations, instead of supervising me, my academic parents offered valuable advice on studies, societies, time management, in fact, any questions that an

inexperienced fresher could have. The academic parents have nothing to do with classes, or academic life, they are there to provide support and advice in times of difficulty, and to have fun with. For example, the beginning of October is marked by Raisin Monday – a morning when academic parents give their ‘children’ funny costumes to wear in a foam fight that takes place in Saint Salvator’s Quad, the fifteenth century university buildings. Unfortunately, this year I did not experience this tradition myself because the foundation programme had classes during that time, but I saw people walking down the streets afterwards and could feel joy, excitement, and friendship in the air. Thus, in Saint Andrews the support for freshers takes the form of the academic families, but it is not much different from other universities where older students give advice to younger students and help them settle in calmly.

So what is the secret of St Andrews’ popularity amongst students from all over the world, more generally, what is the secret of the success of British Universities? My answer is that it is the university traditions that allow international students to fully participate in the university life, become immersed in the environment and feel at home. The University of Saint Andrews is a clear example of the importance of traditions: it is a remote city in already remote Scotland, yet it has a high satisfaction rate and a significant proportion of international students. I think this is the case of most British universities, and each institution has its particular strengths. However, the level of education offered here is not the only reason why it is so popular amongst international students and why they all have positive memories of life in the UK for the rest of their life. In my opinion, taking part in university traditions is the best way for international students to fully join in with university life and to make the most of their time abroad.

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Note from the Student Contributions Editor

The experience at St Andrews is clearly outstanding, and we are aware that the level of integration of international students can vary between institutions (and from student to student). If your university does something special to help new students feel part of the community, we would love you to write and tell us about it.

Ricky Lowes