



# Transforming Lives

**Universities Wales  
One Central Square  
Cardiff, CF10 1FS**

**029 2044 8020**

**[info@uniswales.ac.uk](mailto:info@uniswales.ac.uk)**

**[uniswales.ac.uk](http://uniswales.ac.uk)**

# Contents

**Tina's story**  
PAGE 6

**Ben's story**  
PAGE 7

**Ryan's story**  
PAGE 8

**Sharon's  
story**  
PAGE 9

**Rhys' story**  
PAGE 10

**Keshlan's  
story**  
PAGE 11

**Charlotte's  
story**  
PAGE 12

**Germaine's  
story**  
PAGE 13

**Michael's  
story**  
PAGE 14

**Hayley's  
story**  
PAGE 15

**Caitlin's  
story**  
PAGE 16

**Carrie's  
story**  
PAGE 17

**Tim's story**  
PAGE 18

**Antigone's  
story**  
PAGE 19

**Rebecca's  
story**  
PAGE 20

**Elisha's  
story**  
PAGE 21

**Paige's  
story**  
PAGE 22

**Cathy's  
story**  
PAGE 23

This publication, which forms part of our wider Transforming Lives campaign, highlights the experiences and stories of just a small selection of many thousands of university graduates. With case studies drawn from diverse voices across Wales and beyond, it demonstrates the profound impact that a university education can have, both on individuals and on communities.



## Transforming Lives

We publish this document at a critical juncture for higher education in Wales. There are significant participation challenges within post-16 education as a whole, and Wales now lags behind the rest of the UK in respect of the proportion of our 18-year-olds who are choosing to apply to university. This stark situation presents the very real possibility that future cohorts of young people in Wales will be less qualified than those that have gone before them.

It is imperative that we act urgently to reverse this trend, to ensure that we are able to meet the future skills needs which will underpin our continued economic growth as a nation. We must work together to identify the factors which are impacting participation rates and to make the case for the transformational impact of a university education.

Research consistently shows that going to university pays off, and that a degree from a UK university continues to give a significant boost to salary, employment levels and a graduate's career prospects throughout their life.

But behind each statistic is an individual with a unique journey; a person whose life has changed for the better as a result of higher education.

The experiences shared within this publication vividly illustrate how attending university can open doors to new careers and can empower individuals to make meaningful contributions to society and to experience profound personal growth. Together, they showcase the myriad and diverse ways in which higher education can act as a catalyst, both for individual and societal progress.

I hope that you enjoy reading this collection and would like to thank every contributor who kindly gave their time to this important project. In sharing your own experiences, you have helped us to restate the true value of higher education for the benefit of the generations who will follow you.

**Professor Paul Boyle**  
**Chair, Universities Wales**

# Tina's story

**Diagnosed with a life-limiting condition at 16, Tina Evans ignored the doctors' prognosis of what the future had in store for a Friedreich's Ataxia patient and chose to live every day as it comes.**

After graduating with a BA in Theatre, Film and Television Studies from Aberystwyth University, Tina started her career at BBC Wales where she worked as a researcher for the Education Department and then Radio Cymru.

Tina is also no stranger to the screen, having been involved with programmes like Bwrdd i dri, Taith Fawr y Dyn Bach and Dathlu. And, in 2022, she was invited to be part of the BBC Wales reporting team at the Commonwealth Games.

Tina challenges barriers to make sure she and others have access to doing the things they love in life. She has engaged in all sorts of physical challenges, such as coasteering, and was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by Aberystwyth University in July 2023.



***“University was the springboard to my independence, self-belief, growth and career”***

# Ben's story

**Ben Thompson is passionate about short form storytelling and introducing short films to new audiences.**

After studying Film & Television Studies at Aberystwyth University, Ben moved to the US and settled in New York. There he joined the team at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival - rising up the ranks to become Tribeca's Vice President of Shorts Programming.

When he isn't programming short films, he's making them, including the multi-award winning *Yellow Balloon*, which was selected as part of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. Ben is passionate about giving a platform to Welsh voices, winning the short documentary category at Tribeca in 2022 with a film shot in Ceredigion.

Ben is also nurturing the next generation of filmmakers, sharing his expertise with students at Aberystwyth on numerous occasions, and supporting Aberystwyth's Department of Theatre, Film & Television Studies to send groups of students out to New York to experience the Tribeca Film Festival.



***"I don't think you really realise how much university really shapes who you are and who you will become"***

# Ryan's story

Ryan Eddowes was born with Bilateral Congenital Talipes Equinovarus, also known as "Clubfoot". Growing up, he developed a passion for the natural world but, due to his condition, was advised that a life working with animals would not be possible.

Despite this, Ryan qualified as an animal carer and went on to study Zoology at Bangor University, which gave him the opportunity to diversify into many areas including animal care, wildlife conservation, wildlife media and climate change advocacy.

Studying at university enabled Ryan to pursue his passion for the natural world, travelling internationally to research and film wildlife. Since graduating, he's worked as a wildlife cameraman/presenter, animal management lecturer, VIP Safari tour guide, and zookeeper. He frequently delivers talks to schools, colleges and universities on his life in wildlife conservation/media and is a strong ambassador and advocate for pursuing a place at university.



**"University for me is a pathway of self-discovery, fostering independence, cultivating unforgettable moments and creating lifelong stories to tell. It's such an important stage of your life"**





# Sharon's story

**After leaving school at 15 with no qualifications, Sharon Manning worked as a window dresser and in care homes, before working as a nursing auxiliary at Glan Clwyd hospital for seven years.**

In 2000, Sharon applied to do her nursing training at Bangor University. Following graduation, Sharon followed her passion for oncology, eventually becoming a Gynaecology Oncology Macmillan Specialist Nurse.

It was in this role that Sharon pioneered a new service for ovarian cancer patients (the 'Rocket Drain'), that has been described as life changing for patients. This procedure is now available across the three North Wales Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board hospitals.

Sharon won a MacMillan Innovation Award and MacMillan Fellowship for pioneering the use of the Rocket Drain Service. In 2021 Sharon was given the title of Honorary Lecturer at Bangor University and was awarded an MBE for 'service to cancer patient care' in the King's New Year Honours List 2024.



***"The opportunity for me to go to university at 43 years old changed my life completely"***

# Rhys' story

As a child, Rhys Jones dreamt of a future exploring rainforests and incredible wildlife. However, after leaving school at the age of 15 without achieving any formal qualifications, and with undiagnosed dyslexia, it was a dream that at times seemed out of reach.

After enrolling on an Access course to higher education, Rhys studied an undergraduate degree in Zoology and Genetics at Cardiff University, followed by a MPhil in Medical Molecular Entomology, and a PhD in Phylogenetics, herpetology and parasitology. These degrees proved the gateway to realising his childhood dreams.

Rhys is now an Associate Professor of Evolutionary Biology at Cardiff University and has established a career that has taken him all over the world and onto our TV screens.

Alongside carrying out research, Rhys has worked with DEFRA, and INTERPOL to tackle wildlife crime, worked with Sir David Attenborough on the Planet Earth series, and presented wildlife programmes on channels including BBC, Disney+, and National Geographic. Most recently, he has become a published author with his book 'Becoming Dr Jones', which details his journey in higher education.



**“Going to university has changed me as a person. It is not just about learning a new topic or trade, it is about opening your eyes to the world”**

CARDIFF  
UNIVERSITY

PRIFYSGOL  
CAERDYDD

# Keshlan's story

**Keshlan Padayachee always had a deep interest in history and archaeology. However, due to a lack of representation in these fields, he instead focused on the sciences and pursued a career as an industrial engineer.**

After the disruption of the pandemic, Keshlan decided it was now or never - and left his career in engineering to pursue a degree in archaeology at Cardiff University.

Despite having no prior experience in the humanities, Keshlan excelled in his studies. He has carried out archaeological digs and placements in Wiltshire, Denmark, Pompeii and Rome, with his discoveries from the digs in Wiltshire being showcased in an exhibition at the Salisbury Museum.

Keshlan was awarded a First-Class Honours degree and his academic success has now earned him a prestigious Clarendon Scholarship at Oxford's Wolfson College, bringing him closer to his dream of becoming an academic in archaeology.



***"Life is a continuous journey of change, offering the freedom to evolve alongside it. It can be shaped into anything you dream it to be"***

# Charlotte's story

After graduating from Cardiff Metropolitan University with a BA in Ceramics, Charlotte Manser founded and now runs a six-figure business, which specialises in functional pottery.

At university, Charlotte found a supportive community in the art school that felt like a second home. The course itself covered a broad range of topics, from practical, business aspects of learning, to the philosophical challenges of art and the world.

After graduating, Charlotte spent two years as a teaching intern before deciding to start her own business. Though her education wasn't focused on business, she learnt a lot about making work to sell.

Charlotte received start-up funding from the University's Centre of Entrepreneurship, and over three years, she built her business into a global brand with four team members. A highlight of her journey was a collaboration with singer John Legend, which doubled her sales.

Charlotte now shares her experiences with current students, encouraging them to pursue careers that they love.



**“Find a course you love and you’ll always be motivated and inspired”**

# Germaine's story

Germaine Ngoy Kyabu's university journey began when she met a member of staff from the Cardiff Metropolitan University Widening Access service who encouraged her to apply to the University.

Germaine enrolled on the International English Language Testing System and two accredited courses, which gave her the qualifications needed to gain a place on the Foundation course. It was on the Foundation course that she discovered the Housing Studies degree programme.

The Housing Studies programme offered many opportunities outside of the course which Germaine was keen to embrace. Through a placement at Taff Housing, she was able to secure a role as Project Assistant within the organisation, with many future career progression pathways available.

Germaine saw studying at Cardiff Met as a way to challenge herself and to set an example for her children to follow. She is proud of the new, better person that she has become, thanks to the opportunities at Cardiff Met.



***"I believe that university holds the key to a successful future and I know the change it can make in people's lives"***

# Michael's story

After graduating with a Biology degree from the University of South Wales, Michael Rees started working as a science technician in a school. Seeing his colleagues teaching solidified Michael's desire to become a teacher, prompting him to study for a PGCE qualification at The Open University in Wales.

The flexibility of The Open University course allowed Michael to continue earning a salary while studying. Upon graduation, he secured a permanent teaching position at his current school.

Michael has highlighted the personal and professional growth he achieved during his time at university, including opportunities to engage with the former education minister, Kirsty Williams, participate in an Estyn inspection, and contribute to the school's open evening. He's confident that he can rise to any challenge as a result of everything he's experienced during his time at university.

Michael credits his university education with transforming his life, providing him with the qualifications and confidence needed to thrive in a career he loves.



The Open  
University  
Y Brifysgol  
Agored

***"My life's been completely changed as a result of going to university, and I'm now doing a job that I really love"***

# Hayley's story

Hayley Harris decided to study for a degree in History at The Open University in Wales after researching her own family tree. She was keen to learn more about historical people's lives, while honing her research skills and gaining a qualification that could open doors career-wise.

After suffering with depression and anxiety for many years, going to university dramatically improved Hayley's self-esteem, giving her confidence in her abilities. She enrolled on her course expecting to quit but came out with First-Class Honours, going on to study for a master's at Birmingham University. She has since drafted a PhD proposal which has been well received by academics, and she hopes to undertake this qualification in the foreseeable future.

Hayley encourages others to consider university, not only for the potential career benefits but also for the transferable skills and personal growth it can offer.



***"Going to university has done wonders for my self-esteem, and I have progressed from doubtful and disbelieving to confident and assured of my own abilities"***

# Caitlin's story

**Caitlin, who is profoundly deaf and uses cochlear implants, earned a First-Class Honours degree in Adult Nursing from Swansea University in 2019 and qualified into intensive care where she worked for three and a half years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

While working clinically during this tumultuous time, Caitlin pursued a part-time Master's in Education for Healthcare Professionals, earning a distinction.

Through her work as a nurse, Caitlin realised there were gaps in knowledge of deaf people's needs and subsequently created a booklet to guide healthcare workers in supporting deaf patients. She is also researching how to improve clinical environments for nurses with hearing loss and has secured a prestigious Swansea University Research Excellence Scholarship to further her research on the experiences of deaf nurses in the UK.

Caitlin credits university support for her success, which has opened numerous career opportunities, including lecturing, research, and governmental work.



***“University has had a huge impact on my life. I feel it has set me on a great path to help other people”***



# Carrie's story

**Carrie Power never considered university during her school years. Nobody in her family had attended university and that lack of exposure led to her leaving school without understanding all of her options.**

At age 19, Carrie joined the British Army, initially training as a Vehicle Mechanic and later serving as a Combat Medic Technician in the Army Reserves, before working as a Transport Scheduler for the Army. It offered no progression routes and Carrie started questioning her career path.

She decided to take a chance and apply to university, winning a place at Swansea University to study Modern Languages. During her time at university she also found a place on the University's swimming team, recently winning a bronze medal at the British Masters Championships.

Carrie is now preparing to train as a German and French teacher at Oxford University and is looking forward to sharing her new understanding of higher education and its potential with the next generation.



***"Being at university is the happiest I've been in my entire life. I feel content that I'm on the right path in life now, and that makes any struggle I've had to go through worth it"***

# Tim's story

Tim Allen, who studied Stop Motion Animation at the University of South Wales, went on to become a Senior Animator on Guillermo Del Toro's Pinocchio, winner of the Oscar and BAFTA for Best Animated Feature Film. The film also secured a Golden Globe for Best Animated Motion Picture and five Annie Awards, including Best Picture and Best Direction.

Over the course of his 23-year career, Tim has worked on huge animation productions such as Chicken Run and Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget. He also works as a mentor, travelling the world delivering masterclasses and animation workshops to encourage the next generation of animators.

When he was 18 and trying to decide what to do with his life, Tim decided to pursue something that he would enjoy. Now, all these years later he still appreciates what he does and is grateful that he made the decision to study Stop Motion Animation at university.



***“University was the beginning of the life I have now. It’s where my journey began”***

# Antigone's story

Antigone Cooper's journey to university was unconventional, shaped by her teenage years spent in care. Originally from the UK, she moved to the USA, growing up in Texas before returning to the UK in her early teens. This transition marked a challenging period, leading to a breakdown in her relationship with her parents.

At the age of 16, Antigone began working various jobs, eventually becoming a carer for those needing end-of-life and dementia support. However, she soon realised this wasn't her long-term career path and decided to return to education. She pursued a Psychology degree at the University of South Wales, graduating in 2021 with a 2:1, before going to study for a Master's in Human Resource Management.

During her time at university, Antigone found significant support, particularly as a care leaver. She is now planning on using her experience of overcoming personal challenges to build a career in human resources.



**"If you don't go to university you can only get so far, and especially as a care-leaver you're just a statistic most of the time"**

# Rebecca's story

**After studying Surface Pattern & Textiles at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Swansea College of Art, Rebecca Davies is now employed as a Bespoke Designer by Rolls Royce Motor Cars Limited, ED-R-UK.**

Rebecca had previously secured a paid internship with Rolls-Royce through the University's Swansea College of Art and spent 13 months as part of the company's exclusive design team. This led to her current role with the company.

Rebecca, a first-generation higher education student, credits the university for enabling her to pursue a creative career.

Alongside the technical design knowledge gained, the support received and confidence that Rebecca developed through her course has enabled her to start a career in design that, before her studies, she would not have believed possible.



***"University exposed me to a wide range of opportunities that completely changed my career trajectory"***

# Elisha's story

**Elisha Hughes, a Fine Art graduate from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Swansea College of Art, now works with the University's Widening Access team, using her creative skills to inspire others to consider higher education.**

Deeply committed to building partnerships with local communities, she focuses on creating positive change, particularly in her hometown of Blaen-y-Maes, Swansea, where she has been actively involved in her community since the age of 12.

Her efforts have led to a partnership between the local community centre in Blaen-y-Maes and the University, enabling the community to engage in various learning activities.

Elisha credits her university experience with transforming her life, expanding her skill set, and opening up new opportunities. Passionate about making higher education accessible to all, she views her role in Widening Access as a privilege, allowing her to give back and help change the narrative for others.



***"Going to university provided me with opportunities that I would never have imagined"***

# Paige's story

**Now a Forensic Science graduate and biosciences lecturer, Paige Tynan's journey into science was far from straightforward. Initially discouraged by teachers who predicted she would fail her science exams, Paige shifted her focus to childcare and applied for a degree in paediatric nursing.**

However, after five rejections and failing the required English tests, she reconsidered her path and decided to give science one last chance.

Discovering Wrexham University's Forensic Science degree with a foundation year, she seized the opportunity to catch up on missed A-Level content.

Though she initially struggled at university, a dyslexia diagnosis and support from her lecturers and the Inclusion team helped her to excel. A pivotal trip to the U.S., where she studied Forensic Taphonomy, ignited her passion for the field, leading to award-winning research and numerous published articles.

Paige is now a full-time lecturer at Wrexham University, inspiring the next generation of forensic scientists.



***"It's hard to believe how far I've come and what I have achieved along the way"***

# Cathy's story

After experiencing trauma as an adult, Cathy received incredible support from services such as victim support. She decided to study Criminology and Criminal Justice at Wrexham University so that she could support others through similar experiences.

She initially struggled at university but with support from tutors, academic services, and counselling, Cathy graduated with First-Class Honours. She then pursued a master's in Criminology, during which she joined the Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience [TrACE] project, educating others about trauma's effects.

Cathy is now studying for a Post Compulsory Education and Training [PCET] qualification and has secured a placement in the Criminology department, where she leads workshops and lectures. She also runs TrACE champion workshops to promote understanding of trauma.

Proud of her educational journey, Cathy is considering a PhD to continue motivating others. She credits education for helping her find purpose and boosting her confidence in all aspects of life.



***"If it wasn't for education I would not have found my own purpose beyond being a mother and provider. I have become much more confident in my life in every way"***



***“University was the beginning of the life I have now; it’s where my journey began”***