

ALISON ROBINSON CANHAM: Hello, I'm Alison. I'm 46. I'm currently a freelance consultant working on educational projects, having spent about 20 years working in higher education following studying with the Open University when I was in my early 20s.

Earliest bit that I can remember was living with my grandparents on the Dorset Coast. Very fond memories of a large garden that I could run riot in and getting taken to the beach by my granddad. And then when I was seven, I went to live with my mother and changed schools. And then I went to boarding school in Whitby.

That was an all-girls convent boarding school-- very traditional, very constraining in some ways. So my mother decided it would be a good idea for me to go to the mixed sixth form of an all-boys' grammar school in Essex. That was sort of when it went a bit pear-shaped, really, because the A-levels didn't go according to plan. I got glandular fever, had a high temperature during the exams, so I didn't get to university. And then life took a very different turn.

Life after the A-level disappointment was all quite strange and speeded up because I left home and went out to work, met somebody, got married-- whirlwind romance-- got pregnant. Just before I was due to give birth to my first child, I got a call about my grandmother being very ill and not able to look after herself anymore. So without thinking, I said, right, she comes to live with me.

So there I was at 21 with a newborn baby, a 78-year-old lady suffering from quite advanced Alzheimer's disease, and thinking, hm, what am I going to do for me in the midst of all of this? And that was where I asked in my thoughts, I wonder what the OU is like? And just fell in love with it pretty much from the first tutorial.

Essentially, I did interdisciplinary arts and humanities. And that led into doing the higher level courses focused on literature. So I did something on the 19th century novel. I did something on the 20th century novel. And I did something on post-colonial literature.

The post-colonial literature one was quite interesting because people say, what on earth are you studying that for? That's never going to be any use to you. And I found it really, really useful in terms of understanding different cultures and how people conceive of their identities, even going right back to that arts foundation course, where it was about how did the Victorians conceive of themselves and how did that manifest in the buildings they built, the clothes they wore. And that follows through into how organisations organise themselves and how they expect their people to behave. So it's been personally transformative for me, but it's also been properly useful in the work I've done since I graduated.

It's shaped the career choices I've made. So I've sought out opportunities to do things that advance education. The organisations I've worked for have been working with higher education lecturers, helping them refine their practice, giving them mechanisms for celebrating their achievements.

And more recently, with being executive director of the AUA, I've done that with the less visible bit of the education system-- raise the profile, raise the professional confidence of university managers and administrators. And that traces right back to my experience with the Open University, where it gave me an opportunity to make visible my intellectual potential which the traditional system hadn't given me a chance to do. So in every way, my OU experience has conditioned and informed my career choices.