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Writing sample

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For Charlotte Hopper, a student doctor at the Hull York Medical School in northern England, university is far more than simply an education – it's an experience.

"The traditional image of British student life is a bit of a caricature," Charlotte admits. "Drinking and clubbing every night, sleeping till midday, perhaps a little studying in the afternoon and then a takeaway pizza for dinner – well, it might be like that for some people, but I've never really experienced it!"

Instead, medical students like Charlotte find themselves in lectures, seminars or on placement five days a week, leaving only a few hours each day to cram in sports, extra-curricular activities, and of course a busy social life.

But, as with many young people in the UK, one important aspect of Charlotte's university life is her new-found independence. "York is hundreds of miles from my home town of London, so I've learned to stand on my own two feet. Nearly all of my friends have done the same – they've chosen to study in towns and cities which are quite a distance from where their parents live. Leaving home for the first time, setting up on your own, building your own life... it's all part of the university experience."

Many people think of British universities as steeped in eccentric tradition. But, in the twenty-first century, many things have changed. Today, even at the oldest universities like Oxford and Cambridge, most courses are modular, so students can choose which aspects of the subject interest them.

And many are non-vocational, meaning they don't lead to a particular job. "A friend of mine studied Geography," says Charlotte, "but now he's making a living from selling abstract photography. Another friend read economics at Nottingham University and went on to run his own online poker chips business!"

So, in an era when more than 50% of British young people now apply to university, does student life suit everyone? Charlotte doesn't think so. "University has given me the chance to build friendships from all walks of life. It bridges the gap from the support you receive at school to the independence of adult working life. But not everyone needs that bridge!"