**Joint honours degrees: double the trouble?**

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Studying a joint honours degree at university might mean twice the work, but the experience is enriching

When I applied for my joint honours degree in English and history, I thought it would help me stand out from the crowd once it came to finding a job.

But what I've learned along the way is that a joint honours student needs double the passion, patience and perseverance required to study a single honours degree.

One of the first hurdles you have to overcome is logistics. Working with two academic departments can result in clashing deadlines, twice the staff to get to know and double the feedback sessions.

Rafe Hallett, director of induction in history at the University of Leeds, says: "The first six months of study can be a struggle, as the joint honours student adapts to the demands of two communities and two discourses of knowledge.

"They can sometimes feel stuck in limbo between two 'homes' and feel envious of the apparent simplicity of single honours students' timetables, contexts and communities."

Hayley Reid, a classics and English student from the University of Leeds, found dividing her time and attention between two schools was more trouble than it was worth: "It was one of the biggest mistakes I've made at university."

Reid feels she doesn't properly belong to either of her departments: "I've chosen to focus more on the English side of things, but my parent school is classics. I feel like I'm floating in some sort of subject limbo where I'm neither an English student nor a classics student."

Joint honours students must deal with two ways of thinking and two methods of learning. For me, the stark differences between English and history are manifested in the teaching style – and the personalities – in each department.

The English department at the University of Leeds is situated in a row of small terraced houses. I walk into my seminars, and take a seat in a circle of chairs. Eight of us sit with our notepads on our laps and engage in free-flowing, spontaneous discussion about the set reading.

My tutor will jump out of his armchair to search for his old, tattered version of Shakespeare's Richard III, to draw comparisons and encourage inter-textual thought. He once performed a whole scene from Etherege's The Man of Mode, holding the book in his hand, jumping from side to side while acting out two parts.

Then I'll head to my history seminars to immerse myself in intense, regulated debate in a bare classroom – no bookcases, no armchairs and no digressions. Discussions between historians can become incredibly heated: we are trained to cultivate judgments about the past, and to assert them in a concise, convincing and intellectual manner.

Although studying a joint honours degree can seem like extra hassle, taking on two subjects at university level does work for some.

Phillippa Watts from the University of Leeds, is a French and history graduate with first class honours: "Studying a language was particularly useful as it meant I had access to more journals and sources compared to single honours students.

"I got to study two subjects that I'm passionate about, and have written a really interesting dissertation that bridges the two."

Andrea Major, a history tutor from the University of Leeds, suggests doing two courses is enriching: "I have had joint honours students in history and English literature who have tended towards 'wider world' modules in history and paired that with post-colonial literature modules on the English side.

"They complement each other extremely well, and as a result these students have found that work on one side of their degree has benefited work on the other."

Since employers consistently emphasise the need for graduates to be flexible, adaptable and creative in professional contexts, joint honours students are in a strong position when it comes to finding a job. The ability to switch between two subjects is a useful skill for many job applications. And in return for twice the hard work, joint honours students are rewarded with twice the number of career options.

But the main reason anyone should opt for a joint honours degree is because they have genuine passion for two subjects, and are open to seeing how they fit together.

Doing a joint honours is not just about adding another string to your bow. It's a way of life that defines your experience of university.

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2013/sep/02/joint-honours-degrees-double-the-trouble>