

You're never too old to be intellectually challenged



Having done his undergraduate degree at LSE, **Ashley Mitchell** found he couldn't leave LSE behind. Here he explains why he came back for a second bite of the apple.

It was Victor Kiam who starred in an advert of himself, extolling the virtues of a Remington electric razor and stating that he liked the product so much that he bought the company. Well, I can't say that I quite duplicated his exploit but I did have a somewhat comparable experience in my relationship with LSE.

I originally graduated from the School with a degree in Analytical and Descriptive Economics in 1967. Expecting an upper second, I had been conditionally accepted onto the graduate course, which in those days offered a joint two-year programme with Chicago, granting both an MSc and an MBA. Unfortunately, I screwed up in the exams and didn't make the grade but fortunately, as an insurance, I had also accepted an unconditional offer from Columbia for their MBA course. The years trickled by and a successful business career as an entrepreneur followed,

which led to increasing involvement in the voluntary sector both as a participant and as a philanthropist.

Eventually, the LSE radar picked me up and it wasn't too long before I was actively involved and an invitation followed to become a governor. I subsequently joined and then chaired the £100 million Campaign for LSE. However, despite my increasing involvement with the School, something was gnawing in my brain. Whenever, I came onto the campus, I felt envious of the students evidently having a great time.

I had also got to a stage where I felt that I had achieved most of my primary objectives in life and needed a fresh challenge outside my zone of comfort. Thus, with extreme trepidation, I thought of applying for the one-year taught master's degree programme, to see if my grey cells still operated. Incredibly the academics

I spoke to were most supportive and encouraging. But could I keep up with very bright, young and enthusiastic cohorts? Could I stay awake in lectures (a perennial problem as an undergraduate)?

To my surprise, none of these concerns came to pass. My main problem was finding that, despite copious note-taking when reading articles which I had no difficulty in understanding, when I stood up to make myself a cup of coffee, I couldn't remember who wrote the article or what it was about. It took some time to overcome this problem. But it did strike me that our brains are probably equivalent to a fixed disc: as we get older they get filled with a variety of information, much of it worthless. As full capacity is reached, a "dump" is required before new information can be added. I also found that, despite having no problem working after midnight on my normal business activities, academic study caused my brain to completely switch off by around 10.15 at night. There was no point in further study. But one of the advantages of experience is that it was instinctive to plan my work schedule at the start of each term for the purpose of handing in papers. Not for me, three in the last week of term.

So what did I think of it? It was a great experience and one I would recommend. Demanding, certainly, but skills acquired over the years in other fields helped. The quality of lectures and teaching was in many ways similar to my previous experience. Some great, given by staff clearly engaged with their subject; some given by individuals who would benefit from presentational skills training. Not all the students were brilliant, but at 66 years of age I realised why younger people have the capacity to do things better than oldies. I undertook this challenge while continuing most of my business and voluntary sector activities, as well as becoming a grandfather and seeing another child wedded. Probably a mistake to cram so much into one year as it wrecked the rest of our social life – but in the end I managed. ■



Ashley Mitchell (BSc Economics 1967, MSc Economic History 1972) is a governor of LSE and entrepreneur. Over the last 20 years, he has volunteered much of his time to the educational and charity sectors, including reorganising several charities and chairing the successful Campaign for LSE (2004-07).

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