Support in every aspect of your life

Sering Ceesay

Sering is a Year 13 student at The Bridge Academy in Hackney and is studying for A-levels in maths, economics and sociology. He has been enrolled on the IntoUniversity programme at the Hackney South centre since 2011. Sering recently applied to become a student member of the IntoUniversity Advisory Panel and, following an interview, was successfully appointed.

He attended his first Advisory Panel meeting in October 2014. Sophie recently caught up with Sering to talk about his highlights with IntoUniversity so far and what it means to him to take on this new role.

Sering’s first encounter with IntoUniversity Hackney South was through the Academic Support programme; he visited the centre for support with homework, casually to begin with, and then more frequently. His parents had not attended university, although some of his older brothers had, and he was already considering that Higher Education might be the next step for him. Having noticed his growing commitment to his studies and his future, the centre staff began to approach him with opportunities to develop his aspirations both for Higher Education and his career. Highlights of this time were a creative thinking workshop at Burberry as well as visits to top London universities, including Imperial, UCL and Birkbeck. Sering sums up his experience with IntoUniversity: “I’d say they provide you with a lot of support in pretty much every aspect of your life… once you get to know them they’re just like a second family to you.”

Recently Sering was put forward by IntoUniversity to spend two weeks in Canada on an Outward Bound trip: an expedition into the Rocky Mountains designed to develop inner strength, courage, compassion and determination. Sering had previously studied for an MSc in Social and Cultural Psychology at LSE and was a sabbatical officer, representing postgraduate students within the Students’ Union.

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He describes the most striking discussion at the first meeting being about the future plans of the charity and aims for expansion in new cities. Another prominent feature of the meeting for him was the speakers – he found Anne-Marie Canning of the Widening Participation Department at King’s College London particularly inspiring.

With the support of the Hackney South centre, Sering recently submitted his university application to UCAS. East Anglia, Aberdeen and Essex are his top choices and he would like to study economics, believing that this will stand him in good stead for his future career. Currently he is interested in marketing although he looks forward to finding out more about the different careers available to him when he gets to university. When asked which three things he is most looking forward to about the next few years, he answers: experiencing the freedom of living on his own, practising self-motivation and feeling a sense of community amongst people of his own age with whom he shares the same interests.

He goes on to add that his primary motivation for pushing himself at school is not money, admitting that it doesn’t really mean much to him. Instead he wants to make his parents proud and to know that he won’t struggle in the future. “I just want to do my best, I don’t want to have any regrets.”

Sophie Count

Sophie has been a Fundraising Officer at IntoUniversity since November 2013 and is responsible for individual giving at the charity. She previously studied for an MSc in Social and Cultural Psychology at LSE and was a sabbatical officer, representing postgraduate students within the Students’ Union.

Sophie Count

Photos from IntoUniversity’s Next Big Leap Gala Evening 2015.

We meet Sonia and Anthony Ling who supported our expansion to Oxford.

Photos from IntoUniversity’s Next Big Leap Gala Evening 2015.
2015 Gala Evening

IntoUniversity’s Next Big Leap Gala Evening took place at the Royal Institute of British Architects and was kindly supported by UBS.
Why I chose to work for IntoUniversity

During my last few months at university, I tried my best to avoid that looming question: what was I going to do next year? Whilst some friends seemed to balance job applications, a social life and finals, I used a skill I’d been practising for three years: procrastination. As summer came to an end I felt completely clueless about the future. But, looking back just half a year later, I realise I’d known I wanted to work with young people and that the IntoUniversity Graduate Scheme had secretly been on my radar for months. I first encountered IntoUniversity when I became a student welfare officer – my tutor told me about the new IntoUniversity Walthamstow centre and the exciting projects based there. As soon as I enquired, the Walworth team welcomed me as a visitor and soon as a volunteer. This gave me the opportunity to meet and support some amazing young people and to gain some insight into the Academic Support, Primary FOCUS and Buddy programmes.

Although I know exactly when I first visited an IntoUniversity centre, it’s more difficult to say when I began to feel strongly about educational issues. My cohort of trainees recently participated in a workshop exploring the different factors which influence the identity and aspirations of young people, and evaluating the factors which shaped our own lives and I realised that so many different people and experiences have impacted on my own decisions. I was lucky to grow up in a diverse and vibrant Hackney, and I can pinpoint role models who helped me at every step of my educational journey, from energetic primary school teachers to friends’ parents and my own family. They supported me to build my own aspirations, and the realisation of the impact of their support represented a key reason why I applied for the Graduate Scheme at IntoUniversity.

In Year 11, one teacher introduced me to the idea of studying Classics; I remember thinking it was definitely either something to do with orchestral music or maybe books.

When completing university applications in 2010, my sense of achievement and trepidation was set against a backdrop of nationwide controversy over rising university fees. It was hard not to be aware that while my friends and I navigated our options for the future, the UK was being forced to re-evaluate crucial questions about who was able to access Higher Education.

Once I arrived, university was an environment where we were encouraged to think about the world outside of our little bubble of friends and lectures. Cambridge often featured in newspaper headlines about elitism and I began to realise that however much universities might be attempting to create fairer application systems, inequality is a wide and complex issue. However, much as these social factors motivate me, my reasons for working at IntoUniversity are less about statistics and more about working with young people.

I had the opportunity to meet and support some amazing young people

All the opportunities I’ve had to work with students have been exhausting and challenging, but most of all, creative and exciting. Teaching on summer camps in Hong Kong was a highlight of the last few years: from feeling terrified on the bus on the way to my first lesson to the uncontrollable enthusiasm of some of the young people to take part in bizarre activities I’d created to improve their English. Just before I started at IntoUniversity in January, I was a volunteer at a local literacy social enterprise, the Hackney Pirates, and every session reading with young people in a pirate ship made me feel certain that I’d chosen the right graduate scheme.

Right now, I’m delivering the programmes that I learnt and practised during training, often through role-play scenarios (with some graduates showcasing their dramatic talent by depicting some especially tricky Year 10 behaviour). So far, I’ve really enjoyed the last few months, being trained by and working alongside incredible, creative people – an experience a lot like university!
Spotlight

‘It’s a very personal thing to be in a position to support a charity like IntoUniversity.’

Anthony and Sonia Ling are key supporters of IntoUniversity’s work in Oxford South East, in partnership with Christ Church, Oxford and the University of Oxford.

After graduating from Cambridge, Anthony began working at Goldman Sachs as an analyst. He went on to become Head of Research, Chief Investment Officer and most latterly created Sustain – a product incorporating environmental, social and governance issues into investing. He is now focussing on his passion for developing intellectual property into companies that will provide solutions to major problems.

After graduating from Cambridge, Sonia joined Schroders, an investment management firm, as an analyst. She stayed there for seven years. She then went to work at EMI Music dealing in strategy, finance and EMI investors, before leaving to have the couple’s two children, Mia and Leo.

Would you have had your careers without the degrees that you achieved?

Anthony: Absolutely no way. If you’ve studied at Oxford you have ‘gadzooks’, which is where people from your class in university return to the college. Every time my friends and I go back we stand in the middle of Tom Quad at Christ Church and contemplate how we got there and the debt that we owe to the University.

Sonia: Economics gave me analytical tools, research capabilities and self-motivation. But, above all, university gave me a bridge into a world that none of my friends or family had worked in before. It was transformational and gave me an insight into a world that none of my friends or family had worked in before.

Anthony: I was born in West Yorkshire and lived there until age five, we then moved to Pembrokeshire in Wales. I went to the local state primary school and secondary school, from which I was lucky enough to progress to Oxford University where I read Modern History at Christ Church. Relatives on my father’s side of the family had been to university but it was quite unheard of for people from my school to go to Oxford.

Why did you want to support IntoUniversity’s project in Blackbird Leys?

Anthony: It was the connection with the University of Oxford that brought the IntoUniversity project to our attention. James Lawrie at Christ Church called up and said ‘there is this fantastic thing – IntoUniversity – we’re going to spend a day at a centre and we’d like you to come!’ From that introduction we said we would love to set up something with Christ Church that could really link the college to IntoUniversity on a long term basis.

Sonia: I think both of us feel very fortunate. Neither of us paid for our education or came from particularly privileged backgrounds so we realise how much going to those universities has made such a difference to our lives. It’s a very personal thing to be in a position to support a charity like IntoUniversity.

What do you hope that the impact of your support will be on young people who visit the centre?

Anthony: I think it is about providing for the children what maybe a middle-class person would be able to provide as a matter of course. It’s giving them the insight, the resources and the aspiration to say ‘this is possible, this could be for me. This might not be part of my world now, I might not know anyone who’s ever been to university, but that shouldn’t stop me from thinking this is something I could do’.

Sonia: If it can give them the aspiration and the support to achieve their best, whatever that might be, then I think that it’s worth it. The other thing that I am sure of is that when one person does something others will follow – this knock-on effect will encourage more and more of the children in that environment. It can awaken these young peoples’ aspirations then I think that it will have been a great achievement.

Anthony, you recently attended the launch of the Oxford South East centre…

Anthony: The launch for me was a very emotional event; I couldn’t believe how packed it was. It was great to see support from the local MP who was clearly excited by the prospect of the new centre. The testimonials of the children really brought a tear to my eye when they spoke about what IntoUniversity already meant to them. It was exactly what we’d hoped for. There has already been such an impact.

You have both volunteered with IntoUniversity, how would you describe your experiences?

Anthony: It was really enjoyable and interesting to see the older students at a Business in FOCUS day. I think that particular generation has a reputation for being quite cynical and I was impressed by how they embraced the activity so enthusiastically. It was really nice to see that engagement and hopefully they were inspired by the business environment.

Sonia: I’ve loved it. Every time I’ve come into contact with IntoUniversity I’ve always been flabbergasted by the quality of the leaders in the organisation: the passion and zeal that they bring to everything, their compassion and the care that they show for the children and young people they work with.

What advice would you give to a young person who is starting to think about their career?

Anthony: Just do it! Don’t be afraid, there is no reason why you can’t. If you don’t have the support at school get help and information wherever you can, for instance at IntoUniversity, don’t give up. I did work hard and I don’t think you can gloss over that, but it’s worth it.

Sonia: Without trying to sound corny, follow your dreams and don’t let anybody get in your way in terms of careers and university, don’t do what everybody tells you to do, do what you love and do something that you’ve got a real passion for. It means that it’s not like work - you will enjoy it and you will be as successful as you possibly can at it. If we can do it, anyone can.

Please could you tell us about where you both grew up and your educational backgrounds?

Anthony: I grew up in North London and went to my local primary school. I sat the 11+, after which most of the children from my school went to the local comprehensive. Instead, I got a place at Laytmer, a grammar school. After sitting my A-levels I went to Christ’s College, Cambridge and read Economics.

Sonia: I went to the local comprehensive. Instead, I got a place at Laytmer, a grammar school. I sat the 11+, after which most of the children from my school went to the local comprehensive. Instead, I got a place at Laytmer, a grammar school. After sitting my A-levels I went to Christ’s College, Cambridge and read Economics.

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intoUniversity

We would love to hear your feedback about aspire. To get in touch or to find out more about IntoUniversity please visit our website www.intouniversity.org, drop Sophie an email at sophie.count@intouniversity.org or call us on 020 7243 0242.

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