

# Pathways Podcast Transcript: Season 4, Episode 1 – Reflections and Opportunities.

**00:10 – Tom**

Hello, and welcome back to the Pathways podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie. I'm director of student experience in the department, and I'm lucky enough to be joined today by Adam from the chemistry department at Warwick, Jess Mann. Hello both.

**00:24 – Adam**

Hi everyone.

**00:26 – Jess**

Hello.

**00:27 – Tom**

Brilliant to be joined by both of you and thank you for coming along. The theme today is going to be about, opportunities for the year ahead. So, it's intended to be quite a frank discussion of what went well and what went badly in 2022/2023 and to start to think about what we've been working on to improve your student experience for the coming year. But before any of that, Jess, you are about a month and a bit into your new job after graduating. So, how's it going?

**00:55 – Jess**

Yeah, so it feels crazy to now be a graduate from Warwick. Yeah, it's going well, to be fair, um, a month in kind of getting used to the company, getting used to the new role. So, I'm actually working in a student careers and opportunities company called Group GTI, as a social media marketing executive.

So, the role is quite similar to what I actually did in the department in this department as the student comms intern. So, it's dealing a lot with social media, um, increasing engagement and looking at like the current trends and like marketing analytics and stuff like that. So, all fun, but yeah, it's a, it's a new challenge, new chapter.

**01:36 – Tom**

Thank you, Jess. That's really useful to hear. So, I think it's probably worth getting straight into the questions about this, and looking back at last year, what was your highlight and what was your lowlight in terms of being a student at Warwick Kent?

**01:49 – Jess**

I'd definitely say my final year was probably my best year, and like my favourite year in terms of like all three. I'll start with my highlight, I'd say... It was definitely being more involved in the department and all the socials and having more face-to-face interactions, especially labs, like I've loved labs throughout my whole university experience, but I think the final year was the year that like brought everyone together because you have that whole term of non-stop, like every day you see like your, your lab mates, your course mates, so that was really nice.

And yeah, I think one of the biggest highlights was definitely working in the We Are Chem initiative that was started last year, having a big role in that and then working in the incredible like student experience team and seeing just how much work actually goes on behind all of the, of the events that are put on and all of the like really good ideas that are put forward for the benefit of the students, which is really important.

I'd say, oh, my lowlight was probably, probably the in-person exams experience. So, I think in general, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I think once you get over the first one, all the fear of being back in person and like, you know, going back into that big example is fine after that first time because you're actually going in with all your course mates and everyone's in the same boat.

But it's the kind of unforeseen issues that you can't prepare yourself for. So, with one of my exams, there was an issue with some mistakes in the exam paper and then like other situations that went on, on the day. And then I guess maybe also like the lack of past paper answers for some of the modules. But I know that a lot of stuff is being done now in terms of like tackling that, so it doesn't happen again in like the years to come. Yeah, I'd say that was probably my lowlight.

### 03:51 – Tom

Yeah, I think that, I mean, it was almost like a perfect storm of some issues with the paper. I think there was a fire alarm during your exam as well. And it was a snow day, so buses and things were cancelled. It was, it couldn't have been, I think, any worse. You couldn't have designed a worse day.

I think it is really important to talk about those lowlights because we have learned a lot from them, I think, as a department, and you're right, we are looking at how we can fix things in relation to past papers.

We are looking at how we can make that exam process just easier for students for the coming year. I think a big part of it will be easier because everyone will be used to sitting in person exams from now. I think the challenge we found last year was Because people had sat online exams due to COVID-19, people just hadn't had the practice for, for a long time. Whereas now, all of our current students will have sat exams, all of our incoming students will have sat their A levels. And that fear, I think, that, that you and some of your cohort felt, hopefully, won't be there. But if it is, we'll, we'll do what we can to, to fix it within the department.

Adam, what were your highlights and lowlights?

### 04:56 – Adam

So, I think my highlight was just the kind of the breadth of the events that we ran in the first year of We Are Chemistry. We kind of put it together at the end of last summer. Um, and I Let's be honest, it was pretty much a last-minute plan and we kind of threw it together in some places. And we learned a lot about our student community, we learned a lot about ourselves.

And I think in that short space of time we were really able to pull together a really successful community project. And something that we've been able to build on for the forthcoming year as well. We've actually been able to learn, we've been able to take feedback. I think the fact that we've been able to react to kind of live student situations.

So, in terms of tweaking the program last year to fit in with the in-person return to exams and being able to kind of think of useful and valuable events that were able to benefit students, as and when they came up. I think, as with anything, the academic year can change rapidly. We never know what's around the corner, and I think probably our reaction to be able to provide some sort of support around the transition to in person exams was really, really positive for me. So, I think, really, the kind of the breadth of the events and kind of just how quickly we evolved, um, the project to be so successful was a real highlight for me.

### 06:21 – Tom

I think for me, what I've, what I've really enjoyed about it is the impact that it has when we apply the kind of the We Are Chemistry mindset to other things. And I think, we've spoken a lot this summer about what that mindset is, what it means, but I think ultimately it comes down to this idea of kind of co-designing and working with students to let them, or to give them space to do interesting things. And Jess, you are the prime example of this, where we met you, you were the first person we met actually with this process, and we knew that you had interest in communications, and we just said to you, okay, how can we do this better?

And you told us what your experience was, and you showed us the better way. It makes much more sense to speak to you as a student and actually say, what works for you? What would work for your friends? What would work for those in your cohort? And I think that kind of push towards that co design approach, that collaborative approach, it's really surprised me, I think, how well it's worked in everything that we've applied it to.

So we did have problems with in-person exams, but I think the work that we did to bring together the exam working group to work with Max and the rest of SSLC and other students was really positive in terms of what we managed to do so quickly in response to what students were saying and Adam and I spent a lot of time talking about whatever

we do for this coming year and in the future it needs to continue to be designed by students and not just be designed at them.

And I think that's a problem we find with a lot of student experiences. People will sit in a room, think they have a really good idea about how to do something, but it's, they don't have students in that space. And so how can you ever know, because it's not, not your lived experience.

**07:59 - Jess**

Yeah, that was definitely a really positive highlight for me in that the department wants to listen to students and they want to help students. So, having that initiative there with like the we are chemistry project, I think it's really important for students to get involved in. So that's really great. Thank you.

Obviously because I'm now no longer at uni and I won't really be involved too heavily. I'm intrigued to know exactly what you've got planned for the we are chemistry project for the upcoming academic year.

So, yeah, what's staying the same or what's changed or what's the new vibe?

**08:35 – Adam**

So yeah, building on the conversation really, what we've been doing over the summer is working with students on building a range of events. sessions, for term one initially. So, for this coming term, the return of some favourites; things like LinkedIn Headshots, we've got therapy animals, we've got lots of pizza, but we've also developed a range of activities based on student feedback, and that's that feedback from our current students. And also, from places like the NSS as well. So, we've been able to use those comments in order to kind of shape what's coming up in term one.

So, we'll see things like, autumn prize giving. So, we're going to recognise, the top performers of returning years in October, with a celebration prize giving. There'll also be a focus on STEM GC, as we look to the future of SEM at Warwick. And there's also going to be an onus on careers and, URSS.

So, the URSS is a summer research or public engagement project. So, we'll be looking at how we can support students to, um, to get into that process. We'll be running some sessions throughout term one ahead of the deadline in February. There's also lots of career fairs going on as well, and although they're not a We Are Chemistry event, we're really going to heighten the profile of the opportunities that are available to our current students.

We're currently designing, um, with our senior careers' consultant. We have a new one starting with us, creating a range of events and how we're going to communicate the support that's available around the career service. So, whether that's thinking of jobs after uni, whether that's internships, placements. Whether it's volunteering opportunities, or whether it's just brushing up skills around CV writing, about updating your LinkedIn, just basically brushing up on those additional skills that might be really useful moving forward.

**10:37 – Jess**

Yeah. Thank you for that, Adam.

I think it's really great, the emphasis that you put on community because that was a really big driving factor of the whole reason why We are Chem was started in the first place, but in terms of continuing to build that sort of community aspect of the department, what else have you got planned?

**10:56 – Tom**

Yeah, I'll take this if that's okay. I think that one of the main things that we've been working on this summer, is the development and refurbishment of the new chemistry student common room. We are very, very close to getting it finished now and, and actually seeing what it was and now what it is. It's given me... Yeah, it gives me a lot of confidence that we've really hit the brief that students gave us.

So, we did a student engagement event back in, I think, March or April, where we asked students to come along and just add ideas on post its up onto the wall. And we've managed to incorporate that as well and try to really make it a student space designed by students with their needs in mind.

It's a flexible social space, where students can actually just be and dwell and spend time. What it has allowed us to do as well is use the study room up on the fifth floor, B508, and we can now turn that into a silent study space as well, because previously that was a kind of mix of silent and group study, which obviously doesn't work very well together. Having those two spaces will be really positive in terms of helping to build that community, because staff will now know where they can go to find students as well.

Other things about community in the department, so we're working a lot more with the postgraduate team, so we have kind of a postgraduate stream of events planned as well, particularly around research engagement. But also as well, we've had requests for and have managed to set up, a chemistry climbing club, and that's a pilot this term that we're trying out because students have said that they're interested in it. So, we're really pleased to be able to offer that. Also, it's not just for postgrads, but it was designed by postgrads, and it's something that sits alongside the five a side football that takes place every week, and just helps us kind of grow what we can offer for students to, to get active.

#### 12:38 – Jess

Yeah, thanks Tom. I think that's really important. Like again, the whole aspect of community and communicating with students is really, really important, and it was definitely like a really big part of my final year as to why I just loved the department because that communication was there and yeah, it was just what I needed in my final year. So that was great.

We touched upon careers and the shift to get like new careers people in and stuff like that because I think maybe that's kind of where the department has kind of struggled a bit in the past, but in terms of that, what are or what have you got planned in terms of helping students to get more insight into their future careers.

#### 13:16 – Tom

Adam and I probably both cover this because I know that we've both been working on different aspects. So, I think one of the things that I'm really interested in is, I'm teaching a new module for a year one students called Beyond Science, which it's brand-new part of the new curriculum, and it's designed around building student skills that are linked to future careers.

So, these are alongside the chemistry skills that you'll be learning. The module has been designed with a number of transferable skills in mind as well as the chemistry ones. And so, students will be working in groups to complete a chemistry research project, which I think is really good practice for later years.

And it was something that students requested last year as well, but the transferable skills, we've, built these skills in by working with careers consultants and with the Warwick Awards. So, it's things like project management, communication, teamworking, intercultural awareness, public speaking, public engagement, all the things that benefit chemistry students when they graduate.

There's also Innovation 101, which is the year three module that I teach as well, which has grown. It's got double the number of people compared to last year, which is slightly terrifying, but again, that's a really interesting module, I think, where I've tried to really focus on those transferable skill sets again, and to try to help people feel more confident.

#### 14:33 – Adam

So, I think other things that we're doing to help prepare students for the future within the common room, we do have a small careers library now, so we've brought in some additional books to help. with CV writing or any other kind of like CV related things. So maybe if you know what you want to do, that's great. If you don't want to know what you want to do in the future, that's okay too.

So, we've been able to buy some texts that will really help focus a mind in terms of future planning as well. Something new for us for this year is we have started up a mentoring scheme for the incoming students. So, previously this was run by ChemSoc, um, but we've taken this into We Are Chemistry this year and we've managed to recruit quite a lot of mentors for incoming students, and they will be getting in touch with new students next week and be looking after them and mentoring them over the first few weeks of their transition into university.

So, we've come up with a really comprehensive plan where they are getting in touch with incoming students at certain points to ensure that they are feeling well supported, to make sure that they have everything they need, and basically just be a really friendly, reassuring face to anybody that's new that's coming into the university.

Really the idea is to ensure that all of our new students feel happy, feel supported, and have somebody to turn to really, that might be able to help with questions around, Where do I go? Where do I shop? What do I bring to uni? Kind of all those practical questions that sometimes we overlook. I don't know, what do I cook? Uh, where can I go and get my shopping? And things like that. So, so yeah, we have a bank of mentors that are really there to help our new students settle into university and to help with that transition to university life.

#### 16:25 – Jess

Yeah, I think that's really important. I think the mentoring scheme will be really useful, particularly for the freshers coming in, because I remember when I started, it was, you know, you have so many questions that you don't necessarily want to ask the academics and like the people in, in powerful positions that you might think. So, to ask the mentors for help, like whether it be academic or personal, I think it's really, really good and it's a good kind of scheme to get students more involved and more kind of welcomed into the department.

So that sounds really good. Cool. Yeah. So, what else are you doing to support students?

#### 16:59 – Tom

We've really looked at all the different aspects of the student experience and tried to pick out those kinds of hotspots that students face. You mentioned when you were a fresher and some of the challenges that come with that, we've looked at the cost-of-living support that we give to students around if students are struggling to meet bills or if their laptop breaks. We can now provide laptops, you don't have to request money, we can just give you one on the same day if you can come into the department and you can use that pretty much for the rest of your degree for free and then hand back before you graduate.

We're also looking at support for bills and other things that are coming up for people, so if you've got internet costs at home or anything else where you have a bill that you can't quite make. We're here to support with that and can offer small bursaries as a result. I think what, what's been most interesting from the past year is just the number of things we've been able to do through We Are Chem. So, we have a new project that the university are running called Thrive, which is a women's development program to help them increase their confidence and skill sets. And I think that's a really important thing that we're keen to work on in chemistry and, and to kind of upskill our women chemists and our women scientists, because we know that they are a cohort who can sometimes struggle with confidence, and we want to increase the number of role models as well that they have.

We're also supporting something called the Project Invisible Conference, which has been organised by one of our alumni, Maria, for the 10th of November. And it's a similar type of event, but this is now focused instead on the experience of black chemistry students in the department and so its purpose will be to recruit a number of inspiring speakers to talk about how to build skills build confidence whether that's going beyond into career roles or whether going beyond into further study, you know, PhD and things like that.

I think one project I'm quite excited by is we're running a neurodiversity project, uh, between Warwick, uh, King's College, London and University of York, where we're creating a bank of resources that students and staff can use. Students to be able to support themselves, staff to be able to support students who have neurodiversity to try to help them kind of thrive more at university. We have some students from our department who are working on that project with us, and so really kind of excited to see where that goes.

#### 19:24 – Adam

So, I think you've, that was very, very comprehensive for starters, and so how can I really follow that? But I think one of the important things to take away from this is, yes, we have the We Are Chemistry events, we have all the support in terms of cost of living, IT support, we have the podcast with lots of information, we have mentors, we have academic staff, we have technical staff, we have support staff; there's this massive spectrum of people that are here to ensure that everybody feels supported and that we are here for your success.

But it doesn't just stop at that. The whole project, We Are Chemistry, is evolving all of the time. So, this year will look different from last year because we've evolved it based on working with students, based on feedback, based on what's happening in the future, and we will continue to evolve as well.

So, if there is something that somebody sees in the department like that, that'd be a really great idea. Just let us know because we could probably make it happen. We can work with you to find a way to make it successful. So, what I would say is just really this. It's going to carry on evolving, there's going to be more opportunities.

There's going to be more ways of supporting students. But really that will only kind of work providing you let us know, providing that you work with us, providing you continue to give feedback. We do have new module feedback as well. So, for any current students that's listening, I would strongly encourage you to fill that out in term one, because that'd be really, really useful.

But again, that's just another, I suppose, another example of how we are adapting. So, we've listened to your feedback. We know that it's not necessarily worked for you in the past. So, we are making it more user-friendly. We're making it easier, simple. We're making it a lot shorter.

So yeah, anything that you want to see in the future, it might be more books in the student life library on something that you might find really interesting, it might be an event, it might be something careers orientated. It could be anything. All you need to do is let us know, have that conversation. We're about in person, you can reach us on Teams, on email. We are completely open to evolving further to ensure that what we offer is completely fit for purpose.

### 21:33 – Jess

Yeah, I think that's a really important point. Like if you've got an idea, don't feel scared to bring it up, especially to the student experience team, because for me being a student last year, but also working within the student experience team made me realise that. Like your voices are heard and things that you want, 99 percent of the time, I mean no promises, but most of the time it will be acted upon and that's really important and something that I can safely say that the department does so well.

But yeah, thank you both for kind of giving an insight into like what is going on and, and like the kind of support that students can get. I guess, um, It's also important to maybe discuss how students can also get involved.

### 22:15 – Tom

The first thing I would say would be to follow us on Instagram. It's @WarwickChem, and all of the activities, everything that we've mentioned will be going up there. The easiest way to get involved. is go to events in Welcome Week. So, we have put together a Welcome Week calendar, beginning with a Welcome Week induction talk, which is followed immediately by a departmental lunch. I would recommend coming to that just because it's free food and a chance to meet everyone. And then on the Friday of that week we have, a kind of We Are Chemistry Taster Day where you can come along to the new student common room and we've got therapy dogs in the morning and free pizza, and then board games and other bits and bobs in the afternoon. And again, it's just a chance for you to meet people and to kind of make those connections with, with staff and students.

I think across the year, the way to get involved would be to keep an eye on all the different communications you get, whether it's on social media or on the newsletters that we send out each week. But mainly to think about coming to the events on a Wednesday.

There will always be something on every Wednesday afternoon between 1 and 3 on the science concourse, and so if you come along there, you will find one of us. That's probably the number one way to start getting involved.

You also have Chem Café, which is going to be on a Monday night. So, Chem Café is not part of We Are Chemistry, it's part of what ChemSoc do, but it's also another really good way to get to meet people. So, they're on Monday nights from 5-7pm, again on the Science Concourse just outside the department.

For me, B201, the new chemistry common room, that's a really important place that's going to be kind of the heart for students at the centre of the department, where that will always be open to you. And there'll probably always be someone in there that you can speak to or chat to or just check in with. But yeah, I think ultimately just, we've kind

of said it a number of times, just if you have ideas, just let us know. If you have feedback, just let us know. And I think whether it's through the new module feedback form, whether it's scanning the QR codes around the department, tell us, because if, if you don't tell us what you're thinking, what you want, what went well, what went badly, we can't fix it.

And I think we're so keen to work with students to fix all of these things and more often than not, we'll find ways to pay you for being involved as well, and who doesn't like to be paid, either with money or free food, or something else.

#### 24:33 – Adam

Just a final thing from me is the door is always open, so between Tom and I, one of us will always be on campus Monday to Friday during term time. If face to face is not your thing, you can DM us through Instagram or you can reach us on Teams or via email. No idea is a silly idea, we are open to anything, and it could be as big or as small as you like, but just start that conversation and just contact one of us.

#### 24:58 – Tom

So, I wonder Jess. I think we we've spoken quite in quite a lot of detail about a lot of this, but I wonder if just for a last kind of wrap up question, now that you've been through chemistry at Warwick do you have any final thoughts or advice uh for students who are kind of eager to get involved in what's coming up this year. Like what would your number one piece of advice be for them?

#### 25:19 – Jess

Yeah, it's a good question and one that I've thought about quite a lot a lot in terms of like reminiscing and looking back at my time at Warwick. I'd say one of the main things is just to get involved. I know it's super cliché and everyone says it, but you honestly won't know what things are like until you actually get involved.

I'd say my busiest year was definitely my third year, not only because it was the most sort of academically demanding and challenging but, and, you know, it was heavily, probably my most heavily weighted year of my degree. But it was also my final year, so I wanted to make the most of socials and extracurricular and job opportunities and things like that.

But I think once you find the right balance for you, you'll just be set for the whole year. So, yeah, just what Tom and Adam also said and emphasised a lot is just don't be afraid to ask for help or to look at what other sorts of things you could be a part of because there really is. And I realise that now that I've finished uni, but there's honestly so much that you can get involved in at uni.

And I guess also like a little plug in terms of careers, it's just to get yourself ahead of the game. So, look into what's already out there, for example, Target Jobs is a great platform for students in terms of careers and opportunities. So definitely check out their website and social to find out what sorts of things they offer.

Keep an eye out on socials in general, because everything you need, and all the info will always be on there. So, for example, as Tom mentioned, the War at Chem socials, so if you look on the Instagram, and if you listen to the monthly Pathways podcast episodes, you'll find a lot of information on there, and probably everything that you'll need to know, because a lot of great stuff is being discussed on there.

To summarise, I say just throw yourself in; immerse yourself in the department and all the events and just really make yourself a part of the community because that's what makes the chemistry department at Warwick so special.

#### 27:14 – Adam

I think my last bit of advice for anybody starting with us in, uh, later this month is to be just brave. Try your hand at everything. Some of it will stick and some of it won't, but don't regret not giving it a go. So yeah, just be brave and go to as many things as you can.

**27:29 – Tom**

Thank you. And thank you both. I think we'll add as many links as we can into the pathways link for this episode. So, you can find out the We Are Chem pages, you can find out about cost-of-living support, you can find out about the common room and everything else.

But other than that, Jess, thank you so much for giving us some of your time, and good luck with everything else that's coming up for you.

If you are coming to join us, good luck, and if you're coming back into your second or third year, welcome back and looking forward to working with you for the coming year. Thanks so much.

**27:57 – Jess**

Bye

**27:58 – Adam**

See you soon!