

Ten academics on the advice they would give their younger selves

The great and the good of higher education cast their minds back and consider what wisdom they would impart

October 19, 2020

[Dene Mullen](#)

For many years, *Times Higher Education* has asked academics, higher education professionals and sector leaders what advice they would give to their younger selves as part of our popular HE & Me interview slot. The responses ranged from a curt reminder of the perils of smoking to not being like Jim Carrey right through to good old-fashioned self-belief, with Nick Wright, Turing fellow at [Newcastle University's](#) School of Engineering, saying he should "trust my own instinct more and not be afraid to spend time researching things in which no one else is interested". Here, we showcase some of the best.



Source: iStock

Sir Paul Nurse, a geneticist who won a Nobel prize in 2001 and current director of the Francis Crick Institute, suggested that: "I'm not sure that I would want to change much about where I am today, so I would tell myself to trust my own instincts."

Joanna Newman, chief executive and secretary general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and Olivette Otele, professor of history of slavery at Bristol University and vice-president of the Royal Historical Society, also plumped for sticking to one's guns.

"Believe in yourself, because if you're going to convince other people to believe in you, you need to set a good example," Ms Newman counselled.

Professor Otele said she would offer "no advice. Just words of encouragement: 'You are right to believe in the goodness of people. Keep doing what you do. Working hard, loving, laughing, forgiving and doing your bit might not change the whole world, but it will change you for the best.'"

A similar sentiment also shone through for Lyndsey Stonebridge, interdisciplinary chair in humanities and human rights at the [University of Birmingham](#), who remembered: “I had the immense good fortune to be supervised by the brilliant feminist and psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose, who once said that she’d know her work with me was done once I finally stopped apologising. She had a long wait. It is advice I’d repeat to anybody who feels that they owe their position in the academy to good luck rather than entitlement.”

The idea of relaxing a touch and grabbing exciting opportunities also shone through for a handful of respondents, with Naomi Oreskes, professor of the history of science at [Harvard University](#) and author of *Merchants of Doubt*, imploring her younger self to “have more fun. I was very serious and worked very hard. I now know I could have eased off a bit. But back then, as a woman in science, there was enormous pressure to disprove the naysayers by being not just good but outstanding. I’m glad that young women today don’t have to deal with that. They need to be good, of course, but they don’t need to be better than the men. They just need to do their jobs.”

Neil Glasser, pro vice-chancellor of [Aberystwyth University](#)’s Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences, also said: “Take every opportunity that comes along; you never know where they will lead you. I’m not saying you need to be like Jim Carrey in *Yes Man*, but at least try to be open to new opportunities as they present themselves.”

Martin Bean, vice-chancellor of [RMIT University](#) in Victoria, Australia, also wished he had been a bit more present in the moment at times: “Be more patient. I have been lucky enough to experience many wonderful things in life, but I sometimes wish I had slowed down just a little to absorb what was going on around me.”

Meanwhile, Nayef Al-Rodhan, honorary fellow of St Antony’s College, Oxford, had three separate observations that he felt would stand his younger self in good stead: “Never let small distractions get in the way of your daily serenity; most people are more emotional than rational; a mixture of excellence, integrity, patience and wisdom will always triumph at the end of the day.”

And finally, Bernardine Evaristo, Booker prizewinner, professor of creative writing at [Brunel University London](#) and recent recipient of an OBE, offered some sage, if obvious, health advice, as well as encouragement to embrace adversity.

“Don’t drink so much and definitely don’t smoke that first cigarette. Your life will be unpredictable, and you must enjoy the surprises in store for you,” she said. “Enjoy the struggles that come your way, including poverty, because it will be the making of you. Through surviving obstacles, you will become resilient and that is one of the most important qualities to possess for a lifelong career in the arts.”

dene.mullen@timeshighereducation.com