Edward Wakelam
BSc Computer Science, 1976
PhD student, University of Hertfordshire

A steep learning curve

When Ed Wakelam first joined Hatfield Polytechnic in 1972 to begin his Computer Science degree, he had never seen a computer. It was a tough initial three months. ‘In our first class the Head of Computer Science, Roger Sharp, asked who had an O-level in Computer Science – a course I’d never heard of – and only five of us out of the class of 50 hadn’t got it. At this point I began to wonder what I’d got myself into.’

Even though Ed believes that the Polytechnic took a risk in accepting him onto his degree course, it was clearly one that paid off. He was one of only six students country-wide accepted to work at Ford Motor Company in his first sandwich placement, and one of a handful taken on by Logica in his second. Incidentally, Ed’s tutor counsellor, Mark Jenkin, who guided him throughout his degree is still a visiting lecturer at UH.

He returned to work for Logica after graduation and remained there for 22 years, rising up the ranks to the Board of Directors of their government and defence subsidiary and to become Operations Director, Australasia and Far East. These roles allowed him to see the world and even have day trips to Australia for meetings. His illustrious career saw him headhunted to ICL Fujitsu and then to Unisys, where he held the role of Global VP Application Modernisation & Outsourcing.

Leaving industry

Having retired from industry after nearly 40 years, Ed looked at other options and decided to undertake a PhD. He focused on an area that had been of interest to him for some time, utilising his existing knowledge of training systems and having seen some of the advancements being made in Artificial Intelligence (AI).

‘I believe that there is considerable potential to make significant steps forward in the application of AI to learning systems. Even though there have been huge leaps forward recently in AI and pedagogy [the science of teaching] there has been very little crossover and bridging that gap proves to be a significant challenge. This has potentially huge applications in a range of sectors, and it’s really exciting looking at what might be possible in the future.’

From industry to academia

For those thinking about undertaking a PhD, after being in industry, Ed highlights the change of pace and focus. ‘Returning to study was a challenge, not least because I was used to a pace of objectives and deadlines that gave little time to think things through. Undertaking a PhD is a huge change in approach where it’s essential to reflect and consider, although it’s helpful that I’m used to being focused and I’ve always been very organised!’

However, he’s passionate about his career change. ‘The support that I’ve received from the School of Computer Science, from our administrators through to the senior team has been outstanding. In particular I’m grateful to my three supervisors, Amanda Jefferies, Professor in Technology Enhanced Learning, who took the time to respond to my exploratory email over a year ago and who has guided me throughout, and Neil Davey and Yi Sun, for their infectious enthusiasm of AI and Machine Learning and their boundless support. The field that I’m researching is so exciting and I feel very privileged to have this opportunity.’

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