Having enjoyed a successful and rewarding career in industry, I decided to go back to university to pursue a post-graduate degree that would help me transition back to a hands-on career in earth sciences, which has always been my passion. As my undergraduate degree is in geology, it made sense to expand my education into the field of environmental geology, which is of increasing relevance to the sustainability of the planet. I looked at a number of different universities in the UK and North America, but applied to the University of Strathclyde because of its reputation in the field of contaminated land evaluation and remediation. I started an MRes in geo-environmental engineering in September 2008, which I have just completed.

I was by no means the only 'mature' student on the course, but enjoyed working with the younger students. It was a challenge getting back to studying after being out of school for so long, but I found that many of the skills that I had developed in my working career were transferrable, particularly in presentation and report writing. The MRes is a combination of course work and a research project, but differs from an MSc. in that more emphasis is placed on the dissertation. I opted for courses such as hydrogeology, landfill design, atmospheric pollution and site investigation, but there is a wide range of challenging courses, covering all aspects of environmental science. I would recommend the MRes for anyone looking to augment their work experience, as the coursework cuts across a wide range of disciplines, and ties in to the cutting-edge research being done in the department and in the Glasgow area.

For my research project, I chose to investigate arsenic-contaminated waste slurries from the gallium arsenide wafer processing, which drew on my experience of working in the semiconductor industry. It was a good example of a practical application for environmental research that has real cost implications for semiconductor fabs and the environment. I made contact with several companies to source waste slurry samples and collected most on-site. I characterised the slurries using ICP-MS, SEM and other techniques, becoming familiar with a whole suite of chemical analytical methods in the process. I also spent time in the field collecting soil and water samples from some old contaminated mining sites in SE Scotland.

I was fortunate enough to get a paper accepted at a major conference, CS ManTech and was awarded a grant from the conference organisers to attend and present my paper in Tampa, Florida. I plan to continue my academic career and have returned to Strathclyde to start a PhD looking at arsenic contaminated land in Scotland and Alaska.

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