

Man in the mirror

In a Q&A with Financial World, **James Hobbs** at HSBC describes his journey along the professional experiential route to becoming Chartered in Banking

Why did you decide to undertake the professional experiential (PER) route to Chartered in Banking status?

This needs a bit of background... Years ago, as a clerical member of staff I had a very good idea of what 'button to push' – bank procedures are excellent at covering what to do – but I didn't have a good grasp as to why I was doing particular things. For example, why take this item of security for this lending? What does this regulation mean, or why is it there?

To do something about this, I completed the Certificate in Business Banking and Conduct. It meant I could articulate the 'why' and provide context when speaking to customers. The Certificate led to the Diploma, which helped me as a Relationship Manager. I distinctly remember working through financial and non-financial analysis (cashflow, ratios etc) and chunks on regulation.

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I'm not sure I always enjoyed this, but it certainly made me better at my job. I still have the material, which I ended up using when I was looking after a few Relationship Managers a couple of years ago. My journey continued to the Professional Diploma in Banking and Finance. I particularly enjoyed the module on professionalism, conduct and ethics, which not only looked at principles, utilitarian, deontological, aristotelian etc, but also practical examples.

Having completed those qualifications, I was considering the next step on my journey to chartered status and about to start the Advanced Diploma when a conversation kicked off about going through the professional experiential route. A bit naively I thought that writing four essays about things I've done would be easier than sitting more exams.

Spoiler: it isn't. A year later, I can absolutely say it's not easier than the 'traditional' route. Not only do you need to reflect on years of experience, but you also need to frame everything academically to demonstrate the same level of understanding as that required by exam-based qualifications.

That background is the full disclosure on how I started the PER. I chose to do it because academic study helps me avoid becoming 'blinker', provides context to my professional work and is a prompt to learn more and be better at what I do.

What did you expect to gain from it and what have you found to be the main benefit?

I expected to learn new principles and practices that would complement my work. I also think there is a level of prestige/pride in holding the title of 'chartered'. It's not easy to get there, but now that I'm so close, I'd kick myself for not pressing on.

What makes the PER different to other professional courses is that it is more self-directed. No one hands you a textbook with all of the material and answers. There is a much greater requirement to be self-motivated and to proactively look for information. That said, the course signposts a wealth of material to read and lists learning outcomes and topics. The process has been stimulating. You need to plan how you are going to learn and what you are going to spend time thinking about and researching. When I stand back to consider it, the PER has offered a welcome prompt to think about how my professional understanding, perceptions and experiences have evolved and grown over time. Ideally the insights from my PER will help me to make better decisions in future. Of course, it also flagged the range of things I don't yet know.

The PER requires you to write what is, effectively, a piece of research on your own career. What did you learn that you weren't expecting?

The PER was my first experience of using 'reflective practice'. It forced me to consider the catalysts in my career – an article I read, an event at work, a conversation with a colleague – and the decisions they prompted me to take. What I hadn't expected was that so much of my professional memory and experience was not only practical, "I did...", and academic, "I learnt...", but also emotional, "I felt...". There was my pride in my work but also, with hindsight, a sense of naivety.

That careful reflection, alongside my further reading, has given me a sense of where I am in my career: armed with plenty of knowledge but with lots of room to learn more.

Did the PER change the way that you viewed your career? If so, what do you expect to carry forward into the next stage and why?

Yes and no. This was the first time I took such an in-depth view of my career over a prolonged period. It felt like a 'deep dive' – the first time I had stopped to think about what I thought and felt c. 10 years ago and how my understanding had changed and evolved since.

Did the PER change the way you address your day-to-day work? If so, what benefits/challenges did it bring?

I've found the PER to be a prompt to stop, step back and think. When I'm working, I find I can become engrossed in the moment – what am I trying to achieve now, how do we get from A to B? The PER has made me reflect more on the 'spirit' of a task. It has also made me check my own ignorance, to ask: "What don't I know that might result in a different decision?".

As an indirect benefit of the PER, I have the pleasure of looking after a number of degree apprentices who are studying with the LIBF. While working through my own papers for the PER, I've had a few moments of "oh yeah, I remember looking at this, that's really cool/interesting". For example, I was looking at bank lending and I remembered going through the theory of ratios, cashflows etc., but also seeing how their practical application differed when writing lending applications. The bank uses different terminology and templates and there are nuances for lending appetite etc. Because of that reflection on my own experience, I ended up organising a workshop with our underwriting team so our apprentices could marry the principles they had learnt with practical application.

It can be tough to study alongside a career. How did you manage your time and your energy?

Haha! I had a bit of a hard time with this. At the start of the PER I was in the process of changing roles and working in a completely new department. I knew I would be spending a lot of my time meeting new people, learning new things and putting in extra effort. That said, sometimes it's best to jump into the deep end and make it work, so I signed up to the PER determined to swim.

I went into it a bit naively. I was used to structured 'traditional study' where there are modules and the work is presented clearly, in a largely linear fashion. The PER is more free-flow. You have four essays to write, but a whole host of options in terms of focus and lots of different places where you could start.

But you're not left to sink or swim and I owe a big thank you to Rachel Banfield my tutor. Early on we talked through topics I might write on based on my experiences and areas of focus. She signposted not only further reading but also some practical examples of reflective practice.

In terms of cramming it all in, I find a bit of time in the evening and at weekends to read and write – though I wish I had put in place more structure earlier on to decide which evenings and weekends.

What would you do differently now that you have nearly finished the course?

I'll start with the cliché: Plan better. My other suggestion is: start typing.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the 'perfect' examples and throwing around lots of ideas but I found once I actually started writing, the ideas took shape and became further refined in editing. Thanks again to Rachel who would annotate and kindly tell me some bits were great and others didn't really make a point. (Her actual words were more diplomatic.)

You've been working on the PER during lockdown – a time when a lot of people have been feeling stressed and isolated. What did you find was the best way to stay focused?

I'm sure there are lots of words to be said on this. I was extremely fortunate in lockdown to have my partner, job, health and a bit of space. Small things like not having a commute made it harder to 'change gears' between work/home but lockdown created a lot more flexibility. I'm not going to pretend that I didn't think about how time on a train could have been used to study, but I did find that I had more options as to when to work on my papers.

Lockdown and restrictions aside, my 'secret' to staying focused was telling people that I was studying, knowing they would ask about it when we next spoke. A bit of self-imposed emotional guilt has continued to provide the focus to keep 'pushing the pegs forwards'.

What did you enjoy most about the PER process?

Having a reason to stop and think. As a result of the PER I've had a lot of informal conversations with colleagues about topics that we wouldn't otherwise have talked about. I've also really liked having a structured reading list to work through.

What was the most challenging aspect of it?

Keeping within the word limit! Trying to effectively – and relatively succinctly – demonstrate sufficient experience, knowledge, understanding for each topic in 3,000 words, four times, requires quite a bit of balance and editing. ■

James Hobbs is a Senior Digital Portfolio Manager at HSBC.