

Bridging the gap: How is the IBMS preparing our biomedical scientists of the future?

Sara Alnasir Kassam

Sara Alnasir Kassam, the Secretary of the Salford Biomedicine Society for 2022-2023, sat down in conversation with Dr Sue Jones (shown below), Executive Head of Education at the Institute of Biomedical Science (IBMS). Dr Jones joined the IBMS in June 2022 and recently celebrated her first anniversary at the Institute. Sara and Dr Jones discuss how the IBMS is working to help students jump from life as a student to life as a Biomedical Scientist in the working world.



SAK: Can you shine a light on what the IBMS is doing to help nurture students studying Biomedical Science?

SJ: We're doing a few different things. As far as students at universities are concerned, we accredit specific degree programmes. The IBMS has a role in making sure the curriculum is current and up to date. We're looking at what we teach students at universities to ensure that the understanding that they gain is fit for purpose. We also work hard to support students in their transition into employability to ensure our graduates can get a job. Completing an IBMS accredited degree does not mean that you must go to work in practice; there are lots of other careers for graduates to explore but we look to bridge the gap in employability skills and work readiness for students on our accredited courses to pursue whatever career they want to.

SAK: How does the IBMS monitor IBMS-accredited Biomedical Science programmes to ensure they meet expectations and follow standards?

SJ: Every five years, we ask universities to share documentation. We check if the content being delivered is mapped to the QAA subject benchmark statement. We also examine how the students are taught and whether practitioners (biomedical scientists) actively contribute to educating them. To summarise, the accreditation and re-accreditation process looks to ensure the degree programme delivered has good assessment strategies and if the programme is organised to support students well by scaffolding their learning and skill development.

SAK: How advantageous is your educational background for fulfilling your role and ensuring students obtain as much as possible from accredited Biomedical Science degree programmes?

SJ: I always look at student feedback. When we look at the programme's quality, we look at employees' and students' points of view and take them into account. I'm looking at the course, how it has been developed, and how it is running. Universities and academic teams complete an annual report for the IBMS, and they tell us if they made any changes and what those changes are. A vital piece of our monitoring is around student feedback, we always ask programmes about student feedback and analyse this in detail.

SAK: How would you describe the transition from university to the workplace? How do you aim to make the transition smoother?

SJ: The student's transition from university to the workplace, can be a massive jump, it's hugely different. For students, the main question is: how do you know how big that jump is unless you've been in a work environment? One of the things that I'd like to do is get as many students as possible to visit clinical laboratories. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, many universities had to do online open days. Universities had to film their teaching labs and make [the lab tour] into a video, that kind of thing. I'd really like to do that for clinical pathology laboratories because getting all students to visit is difficult. I am working with the comms team at the IBMS to work out how we can organise virtual pathology laboratory tours for students. I will endeavour to make [the videos] an accessible resource. The students may then use the videos to look at the different disciplines and decide what they like. Post-COVID, some universities have been able to organise a trip to a local hospital, but it is not always easy to do; sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. By having freely accessible video laboratory tours, it's just taking that barrier away. It's thinking about everybody having that access and it being free. We're also starting to do the monthly IBMS support hubs to help develop our students to be confident to make that jump.

[Find more details on all IBMS Support Hubs in 2023.](#)

SAK: Why would you encourage more biomedicine students to attend these support hubs? How can we benefit from them?

SJ: We've now got a series that will go through to December. Due to the IBMS Congress, we won't hold a support hub session in September. The support hub topics are planned to help bridge that gap between university and the workplace. We picked a theme for each support hub that we think will be useful. They only take an hour of your time. Each support hub session is held on Wednesdays at lunchtime. We did this purposefully because we hope most students will be free to allow as many as possible to attend and use the support provided. We also picked this time to allow people in practice to access the sessions, which should coincide with their lunch hour. What is fantastic about the support hub sessions is that if you look at the topics we cover, we're trying to time them with when they might be helpful for people, such as

placement interviews in May, for example. I highly recommend that students attend these sessions in large numbers or access the videos from the IBMS web pages to watch anytime.

SAK: What are your aims for introducing the HCPC SoPs so early on? And what are your aims for students to get from it?

SJ: The HCPC has two sets of standards: the standards of education and training and the standards of proficiency. These are the 2 bits of the jigsaw puzzle that you need to meet to be able to register with the HCPC to practice as a biomedical scientist. This is where the IBMS comes in; we look at the curriculum you're taught at university and ensure that it contains the appropriate content in the right depth and breadth. We use the HCPC Standards of Education and Training to inform what we ask of universities regarding the programme they deliver.

You might have heard about the HCPC Standards of Proficiency when you've had laboratory sessions, when discussing your critical skills or in preparation for a clinical placement. The objective of the clinical placement is to allow you to complete the IBMS registration training portfolio. Completing this portfolio demonstrates that you have met the HCPC Standards of Proficiency. By integrating some of the HCPC SoPs into your programme delivery, you are familiar with some of those standards already within your degree, so they don't seem foreign when you are on placement.

SAK: What is the difference between the IBMS and HCPC?

SJ: The IBMS and the HCPC, work together, but we're not the same. We're slightly different organisations and do different things; the HCPC are a regulator and have a duty to protect patients and ensure everyone is trained appropriately. The IBMS accredit degree programmes, provide the IBMS registration training portfolio, provide laboratory training approval, and organise the assessment of the portfolio to sign people off to say they've successfully met the standards of proficiency. This will allow them to register with the HCPC after they successfully complete the portfolio and their IBMS accredited degree programme.

SAK: We've now talked about university students; how do you prepare those who are slightly younger to enter the Biomedical Science field?

SJ: The short answer is that we don't do enough of it now. I want to get involved with careers advisors and have done so by writing a blog for UCAS that goes to teachers and careers advisors, but I realise that it's something we need to do earlier. For primary schools, we have a comic book called 'Superlabs' that is tailored for primary school-age children; getting them involved in science is excellent. One of the things I did when I worked at a university was set up a science club and partnered with the local primary school; they loved it. Primary school children loved science experiments; it's cool, it's brilliant.

We do have some resources online and on the IBMS web page, which are to support people to be able to go into schools and do practicals, talk about biomedical science, and all those kinds of things but we don't have many resources, and we're relying on people having the time and ability to go to raise awareness. We've got influential ambassadors in our students who could be our IBMS ambassadors and go out and talk to pupils at primary and secondary schools. If you were to go to your school and say, I came here five years ago, and this is what I'm doing now. That's much more powerful than me turning up and saying, this degree/field is quite a good thing. Student IBMS ambassadors could be genuinely a widespread and effective initiative.

SAK: I was going to ask about Biomedical Science Day. The IBMS established this, which is a fantastic notion, but I feel like sometimes Biomedical Science Day, it being a day, it's just not enough. You said that having student IBMS ambassadors would be a good idea. How can these ambassadors make every day a Biomedical Science Day?

SJ: We are missing a trick by not showing people enough about Biomedical Science. I agree with you that having a day to celebrate and drawing attention to it, is good, but we can't have one day in 365 to raise our profile. We're looking at our online presence and being able to do more. I think there's something in us providing resources to give to people for them to take and use to promote biomedical science. Once we've got resources, it makes it so much easier for people to have those conversations or think about what to say when they go. We often wait for people to come to us, for example we might have these conversations during a university open day, and that's great. At the IBMS, we could do more to go out and spread our message and awareness. Sometimes, if you ask, "What is a Biomedical Scientist?" – people don't know, but we've got little videos on our YouTube channel, which help get the message across.

A few examples are:

- [What is Biomedical Science?](#)
- [What happens to your sample?](#)
- [The Biographies of Biomedical Scientists - From the IBMS Website](#)

SAK: We have IBMS Congress coming up in September. I'm looking forward to it because you have a Student Session tailored for Biomedical Science students. Thus, can you delve into why the IBMS Congress is super important?

SJ: IBMS Congress aims to raise awareness; it's about people knowing what is out there. At Congress, we aim to have a suitable range of things for people. Congress also helps unlock people's understanding of some of the terminology; I think sometimes we forget that not everybody understands all the words we say. For example, what is the difference between the IBMS and HCPC? What is STP? What can you go on to after your degree? What's it like being a biomedical scientist? I'm thinking of getting graduates who graduated a while ago to come along and talk about where they are now, which helps inspire students. Again, it's much easier for you to talk to somebody like you afterwards; IBMS Congress is a fantastic place for that networking to take place.

SAK: It is incredible that the IBMS works hard to ensure students feel confident when we graduate. Can you shed light on how you endeavour to build this confidence in us?

SJ: It's preparing students to take on challenges and making it less scary, because during your degree you know exactly what you are doing day to day as it is all planned. When you finish your degree, you can think I have known exactly what I was doing for three years, and I've got to the end of that, now what? The less scary the point of graduation is, the better. It is really important to build confidence and knowledge about available options for careers and taking next steps. You don't need to have a defined route. It's reassuring for students that you don't need to have every element of your life planned out. It will sort itself out; it will be OK. I think that's quite an important message for students.

SAK: Would you like to share any final thoughts, Doctor Jones? What has been your new beginning?

SJ: My new beginning was when I started at the IBMS in June last year. I think it's helpful for me to reflect on the IBMS where it is now; it is in a good place and already does a lot of good stuff, but we need to move with the times and be more relevant and relatable. That's what I see my role being. We could modernise what we do and be more interaction friendly. The new beginning, as far as learning and teaching is concerned and education and training for the IBMS, is about updating and improving what we've got. It's about moving forward and making ourselves as relevant as possible to people like the student members, the newly graduated members, and the licentiate members.