



Career stories

Caitlin Owen

Salford lecturers Dr Sara Namvar and Aimee Pinnington in conversation with Caitlin Owen

Describe your journey from college student to now

Sara: "I'm a lecturer in biomedical sciences, but I didn't do a degree in that. I teach cell biology, physiology and anatomy. I come from a research focussed background, only coming into teaching two years ago.

"In college, I always wanted to do medicine. All my family went to university, but not to study medicine. I didn't go to private school, and I've always lived in an inner-city area, so there wasn't that mentor to support medicine applications.

"I didn't get into medicine, but neuro- science had caught my attention as a plan B. I got on to that. It was really hard core; I struggled and failed MANY modules! I re- sat the vast majority of my exams in first and second year. I think I had a lot of anxiety at the time but didn't realise it, so my sleep was all over the place.

"In the third year, I think I had more of a support network. I really improved and managed to pass my degree in the end with a 2:1 – that was a very steep trajectory!

"There was a more funding knocking about those days, so I ended up doing my final year project in a lab at the University of Manchester and then asked, 'Can I do a PhD?' It turned out there was one available. It was with AstraZeneca as well.

So, then I had a four-year funded studentship with significant industry contribution and extended placement. I had an excellent PhD supervisor who was so understanding – I was inexperienced, but the PhD made me. I spent a significant amount of time at AstraZeneca, and it was very regimented. They would pick me up if I made a mistake. I had to face a lot of red tape and telling off in the first year, but I think it helped me develop resilience – accepting all the tough feedback, crying about it if you need to, but then acting on it.

"I enjoyed every moment of my PhD. After that, I just knew I wanted to be a postdoc.

"A postdoc is somebody who is very heavily involved in a research project. You're not a lecturer, you have some very small bits of teaching, but the major responsibility is research. You work on set big projects, spend a lot of time in the lab, and you're busy writing papers. It's like a continuation of the PhD student role, but with more responsibility. I did, about seven or eight years of post-doctoral research at the University of Manchester.

"I considered a couple of times leaving academia because I can see there is this bottleneck in going from your degree to PhD, to actually securing a permanent post. It's an extremely slim chance of making that

transition, and to be in a heavy research institution. I looked at a lot of other places to work. But finally, a job came up here at Salford. It went well, and I was offered the job that evening.

"I didn't have a career plan after I didn't get into medicine. I just decided to focus on what I was enjoying."

Aimee: "I thought I wanted to do medicine, applied, got in everywhere. I was the first from both of my parents' families to go to university, went to quite a rough, inner-city school, so no sort of support, like Sara talked about. But, because my parents both worked in a hospital, it was very easy for me to get work experience. I got placements everywhere. The GP even lived next door!

"But then the more work experience I did, the more I realised I hated it. My dad came home to me crying in the kitchen trying to get stuff ready for university. He said, 'Aimee, you don't you don't have to go'.

"I said to him, 'I think I want to be a scientist; I don't think I want to be a doctor'. I like all the theory, and I want to help people. But every time I came off a ward I was in tears, and all I could see trying to get sleep at night was whichever patients were treated that day, and death.

"We spoke to the head of course for Keele University and she said told me to come to her on clearing day. That's what I did, and I got in, at a university only about 30 minutes away from home, to do biomedical science. "It was one of the best three years of my life. I loved it from start to finish. I did a placement in my second year, but it wasn't a year out like at Salford: I worked through Easter and summer break. Then I graduated with a 1:1. With an IBMS certificate of competence already, I worked as a BMS immediately – but I was in the wrong speciality. I worked in anti- coagulation, a subset of haematology. It's patient facing – a lot of community clinics. Patients can think you're a doctor or nurse. If you're a man doing clinics, they think you're a doctor, as a woman, they thought I was a nurse. I wanted people to know I was a scientist, and that there are other health-care professionals involved in treatment.

"So, I waited for jobs to come up in haematology and transfusion, where I really wanted to work... 6 months later, I got a BMS post there. I've been there since! "I've done the specialist portfolio, and I did a masters in 2018. I did get on to do a funded master's straight after my undergraduate degree, which would have been great.

But when I got what I considered my dream job at Stoke, they said, 'We can't give you the time off to go and do this master's, so you choose: do the masters, or work with us.' So, I gave up the masters and went to work with them instead.

"Later I did my masters at Chester University - I wouldn't recommend this - full time while I was full time on shifts. I did it in a year and it was a bit intense, but it was great. That is what ended up getting me into this job at Salford, because I was asked to go back and do some guest lecturing, and I really enjoyed it. Something I always enjoyed in the lab was training people and doing one-to-one sessions. I came home from a guest lecture at Chester and told my boyfriend, 'That was great. I wish I could do more of that.' He suggested looking online for jobs, and it was the closing date for one at Salford. I can be impulsive, but it works sometimes.

"A week later I came for the interview. I sweated my way through most of it I was so nervous. I assumed I haven't got it, because I heard nothing for two weeks. In the interview, they mentioned how I was younger and less experienced than other candidates, and didn't live in Manchester. "But when Lucy Smyth rang me and said, 'Do you want to work with us?' That was that! "Yeah, I felt quite daunted coming to work at the uni. I shouldn't have done, because it isn't that kind of environment. But one thing I think is funny is that in the online classrooms everyone is Dr. something, and I am just Aimee Pinnington, because I don't have a PhD, and some students pick up on it. But I think my advice to students would be to not feel limited by not perceiving yourself to be on the same level as others."

Have you ever felt pressured by society into certain jobs if it wasn't necessarily what you wanted – because there's specific jobs that are seen as being extremely desirable?

Aimee: "I don't think anyone put pressure on me apart from myself, but I think that comes from that societal pressure that you're talking about. Nobody had gone to university and in school I was straight A- stars – without trying. I was just lucky. When I went to college, that changed. I had to try really hard, and then I tried really hard with my degree. My grandparents are from what would could be considered a lower-class background, and they were so ecstatic. I honestly thought, 'Oh, my God they'll be so let down if I don't do this'.

"When we had to apply for work experience in year 10, my teachers said I had to do the medicine ones. They were trying to encourage me, but I wanted somebody to say, 'What do you want?'"

I did go through quite a classic route until I finished my degree. I was 20. When I got my first BMS job, being one of the babies of the year, I haven't even hit 21. Yet I was in what was perceived to be an extreme job, and I did really enjoy it. But then I started splintering off, doing my master's later, and now I do this job split. I don't really run a classical career course. But it's right for me.

"I want to stay working as a scientist. And once you get to the lab management level – you rarely have on a lab coat. Their roles must be really challenging in other ways, but I want to stay working as a scientist."

"But I also love the teaching. I taught all through university as a ballroom and Latin dance teacher. I tried to stay doing that, did four nights a week teaching dance while at university, and I just missed it."

"When I was younger, I used to quite regularly be full force, and then I'd have a week, where I literally couldn't get out of bed, and then I wouldn't learn from it. Now that I'm older I'm more self-aware and I avoid the burnout better now.

What sort of shifts were you working before, Aimee, when you were purely BMS?

Aimee: "I used to work a 6am-2pm, 9am- 5.30pm, 12pm-8pm, 6pm-6am, or 6am- 6pm at the weekends. Every day in the week would be different, you could go from a night shift back to an early shift to back to a night shift. It was very random; you didn't do like a block of a week of each. And then in the mix of that you had on-call work as well. So, if I finished a core day, which was 09.00-17.30, I'd come home with a bleep, and I could be phoned any time until six o'clock the next morning to go back in.

Is it important, then, to take into consideration not just what you enjoy but also the actual working life, the tasks, the hours you'll work?

Aimee: "Yeah, definitely. Even when I was there on nights, I still enjoyed my work. And actually, in a way, I enjoyed that more because you work a lot more independently, you run the entire section on your own, so you know where everything is. You don't have to rely on anyone else.

Sara: "As a comparison, and in terms of my life as a PhD student, it was very much 09.00-17.00 and then some bedtime reading. So, I'd have a research article – I loved, I still love, reading – so I would gladly read a handful of research articles, through the course of the week as my bedtime reading and at weekends. Then as a as a postdoc, I'd say that that pattern has continued in all my postdoctoral years. And there's travel involved. It's great going to conferences and that sort of thing.

"Now, as an academic, it's highly variable, you'll have a week where it's nine to five, and that's good enough, and you'll have other times where you're working 12 hours a day, and also getting up Sunday morning to do stuff. It comes in massive peaks, and then you have periods where it's actually calm, and it's a nine to five, normal job, and it's okay.

What do you love about your job?

Aimee: "I enjoy most having a direct impact on patients. That leukaemia that I found yesterday – there's about an hour, where I will be the only person who knows that that patient has leukaemia, and that's a really privileged position. How I deal that will directly affect the patient's chances. If I get that wrong, and they start them on treatment wrong for the patient, then that can be catastrophic, and now that I'm teaching at Salford, I know a lot of the students who I interact with will go away and do the same thing. I think that's a position of privilege and that's the bit that I love the most."

Sara: "I enjoy different things at different times. Obviously, there's all the Biomed Soc and GEMMS stuff, I massively enjoy all of that, because you can see the students are enjoying it. I intermittently enjoy research. Nothing can compare to when you get a positive result in the lab, a paper accepted or even a grant! But success in research is infrequent. Grants and papers get rejected and experiments fail."

That's an interesting insight. It sounds a bit like, with research, that the highs are high, but partly because the lows are low.

Sara: "That's what it is. When you're a PhD student, and you're a postdoc, it's such a laugh in the lab, because there's loads of students, the radio is on and you're just having a real good time and following protocols that you're good at. Especially because you become quite technically excellent, and all PhDs and postdocs do, but when you become an independent academic, you become quite detached from that first-hand lab experience. You pop your head in and you talk to research students, if you're lucky you train them. And so yeah, you kind of end up losing that kick when you become a lecturer. You don't really get that very often."

Seems like you touched on what you would wish to be different there. Aimee, is there anything you would like to change?

Aimee: "Being self-aware to the point where you do not feel like it's a bad thing to say, actually, what I really need is to have a break. I really need to just take this weekend off. I think that comes with a bit more awareness. Maybe as you get older, I'm not sure I would have had the capacity to do that at university."

"It's really interesting. As a teacher, I think a lot of the students are really amazing and do things that I definitely couldn't have done at their age or experience level. Which is strange because like I said, I'm 26, I'm not that much older than the students. But wow, there must have been a big change since I left University in my own development, to spot those things. "Sometimes, with external pressures, all the pressure we put on ourselves, we don't listen. I think all of us should do more to listen to ourselves. you know what's right for yourself, don't you?"

Aimee: "I feel more optimistic, to be honest, having done this interview. Doing things like this, it does make you think that 'this is why we do it'."

Sara: "A bit of self-reflection."

Want to know more about our academics? The Biomed Society will be organising live interview sessions with academic staff and other professionals to learn more about their experiences. Join the society and follow us on social media for updates. <https://www.salfordstudents.com/groups/biomedical-science-9e9d>