BIOSCIENTIST
The Salford Biomedicine Society Magazine

My placement experience

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Finding and securing a placement

Last year around May 2021, I saw a placement advert from Dr Sara Namvar posted on Blackboard. At the time, I was looking for an IBMS (Institution of Biomedical Science) placement, so I was torn whether to apply for a placement based in Dr Namvar's lab. Although I did not think I was going to get a placement due to my lack of experience, a month later I received an email from Dr Namvar and was offered an interview. I was shocked, and my family said, 'I'd be stupid not to take it.'

Since this was my first ever professional interview, I emailed students from my course who I knew secured a placement, and professors who could give me advice. To prepare for this interview I would first look back at the placement advert and look at the references to earlier research, I would read those references to understand the context of the research project further. Emailing professors and students that secured a placement, about how to create a CV, what to expect during interviews and how to prepare for it, all helped me secure a placement.

To create a CV, I went to CV workshops ran by the university's Careers and Enterprise Team hosted regularly online, and attended a CV workshop, that was created by a student in my course and member of the Student Biomedicine Society, Nadia. To start, I got advice from Dr David J. Greensmith, setting up a Teams meeting with him. Greensmith's advice was that I be honest and to make sure that I read the advert and be prepared for questions that will be related to the advert. So, I would look back at the placement advert and write down and revise all relevant skills I have done that the potential supervisor expects.

Additionally, I would prove that I achieved a specific laboratory skill by looking back at my module booklets and give examples within my CV, so the potential supervisor knows what skills I have achieved. This meant that I will be confident to explain those achievements, in the interview if questions related to them was to be asked. I also got advice from Dr Caroline Topham, she suggested that I read recent literature by the potential supervisor, to show that I am serious and committed. So, I would search up recent publications from the potential supervisor and read them, so I know their interests and show commitment through the interview. During the interview, Sara offered me the placement, four days later I accepted the placement and would begin on the 29th of September 2021.

My research project

My research project is around investigating the mechanisms of Peritoneal Dialysis (PD) Induced Peritoneal Fibrosis. Specifically investigating the mechanisms of mesothelial dependent fibrosis, with close attention to the role of pattern recognition receptors during the process. I would be producing data using cell culture as well as molecular techniques like ELISA Assay and MTT Assay.

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The genesis of my placement

The beginning of placement was excellent, I met and worked with brilliant people who have all passion for science. My team consisted of a Research Technician named Dr Muna Abubaker, Sara's previous placement student Olga, and other placement and PhD students' colleagues. My colleagues Mary and Zuchie, taught me specific experiments correcting me on my mistakes and increasing my knowledge during the placement. Muna initially taught me one of the most important skills in research laboratories; Aseptic technique, and Cell culture. Then she proceeded to teach me more molecular techniques, for example MTT Assay – including a recap of Haemocytometer cell count.

Working in a Cancer research laboratory can sometimes be hectic and sometimes peaceful, the day could fluctuate one way or the other. There were days when cells would not grow as fast as we needed them to, or did not grow at all, or everything seemed to go according to plan, then experiments failed spontaneously. This would force me to go back to the drawing board and re-plan or redo the experiments. Some days would go smoothly and otherwise the experiments have been successful and data was produced for us to analyse. Looking back, I am glad experiments failed because that taught me to observe more of 'what went wrong,' it helped me realise that this is normal since science cannot always be perfect. Failures within the lab would make me more resilient and better my skills and my understanding of working in research.

Advice on getting a placement

For increasing your chances of getting a placement you should:

- Go to CV workshops, whether it is workshops on My Advantage or workshops on Microsoft Teams within the Salford Biomedicine society.
- Join scientific societies, like the Salford Biomedicine Society, or professional societies like the Royal Society of Biology, Institute of Biomedical Science, The Physiological Society etc., for future workshops, events, and activities to participate, to improve your CV.
- Blackboard – keep close attention of advertisements of placement on Blackboard, every day. Have a look at all placement adverts, take notes on the specific topic, the project at hand, references that might be on the advert and deadlines. Think about the pros and cons of the placement; if the placement is too far from home, how will it affect you financially? Will it be beneficial for your future?
- Ask professors for advice – as I was preparing for my interview, I asked Dr David Greensmith and Dr Caroline Topham for advice. Dr Greensmith arranged a 10-minute meeting on Teams and gave me advice on how I should present myself on the interview. Dr Caroline Topham gave me advice on reading research and recent papers of the potential supervisor. This will show that you are determined and serious during your interview.

Advice when you are on placement

- Independent research – this is essential regardless of if you work at an hospital, within industry or on a research placement. Supervisors cannot be there 24/7 to guide you, so expect to see them physically either regularly or rarely. This skill will improve your critical thinking and makes it easier for you to complete your dissertation in the final year.
- Secure opportunities – when there are opportunities, grab them whilst you can. For example, if you have the chance to learn a new technique, skills that might be new or something to improve on, take it. This will improve your professionalism and maintain good practice not only during placement, but for future careers.
- Learn from your mistakes – experiments do not always work because Science can be unpredictable, a mixture of trial and error. Technicians have their own way on running the laboratory and/or experiments. When on placement, mistakes will occur and it is normal, whether it is adding the wrong concentration in your experiments, making something sterile, non-sterile etc. What differentiates a good scientist from a bad scientist, is a good scientist will take their mistakes into consideration and finding out the root of the problem and then trying to fix it, so the mistake does not happen again. Do this and you will build good practice and greater professionalism, preparing you for your Final Year Project and securing jobs after graduation.

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