

“How does the experience of your course compare with any expectations you may have had?”

I did have certain expectations when I commenced my degree: doing straight biology (or bilge, as it was affectionately termed) I had come to terms with the existence of irrefutable truths: I would be spending entire days in the lab bent over petri dishes, I would continue to be pitied as a failed medic, I would spend days cutting up small furry animals under the supervision of socially-inept demonstrators with terrible grammar, I would, finally, become one of the better spellers in my cohort.

I entered upon my degree in slight denial about the nature of 'pracs'. After all, how could they possibly justify keeping you in the lab for more than a couple of hours? Three hours at a time breathing in laboratorial aromas subtly moved from unbearably constraining to addictive – with the development of technique and complexity of tasks came the stab of pride on surveying a perfectly labelled dilution series. Slowly we gained surreptitious pleasure: an accurate Miles and Misra plate became a thing of extraordinary beauty, together we shared the innocent joy of correctly calibrating our first microscopes. With the observing of the fragile rolling Volvox indoctrination was complete and the subsequent 6 hour practicals are rewarding rather than horrific.

Despite never feeling compelled towards medicine or sick people, I was accustomed to being treated as a failed medic, so the attitude of the medically inclined lecturers came as no surprise.

“We know that you weren't *quite* bright enough to qualify for medicine (and therefore my respect), but let me try and explain some of the basics of histology/physiology/pathology. I'll use small words...” (never spoken, merely implicated)

Their tactless commiserations became something of a running joke, made funnier by the fact that the biologist lecturers behaved in exactly the same way towards their medic charges.

Some things never change – as with teachers, for each lecturer who plainly grudged every moment spent in front of semi-attentive undergraduates there was one who sought to shorten their life expectancy by 'Audience Participation'. One stooped to the exchange of chocolate for correct answers (which did, admittedly, yield some half-hearted responses) but generally drawing replies from a wall of 300 faces proved cringingly unsuccessful. The range of lecturers astonished me: from the thoughtless to the overly-empathetic, from the good to the very, very bad. As with any faction, there's always one – the endearing lecturer who didn't seem to realise that it did no good to stand directly in the beam of the over-head projector.

Benign bureaucracy is always with us to stand as a reminder that one must pay for every pleasure. I found – surprisingly – that the punishment was not examination but 'feedback'. Questionnaires. Hundreds of them. I had steeled myself for impersonal, uncaring lecturers; what I didn't expect was said uncaring lecturers to round off a semesters-worth of indifference with 20 tick boxes on how we felt about “BL 9876 - Behaviour of the Push-me Pull-you”. Whether, somewhere in the depths of academia, there is an army of specially-bred lab rats trained to collate the data or whether the work is left to the long-suffering Undergraduate Office staff, the work put into improving the course was sensational. Since the units appear to change beyond recognition every year, undergraduates have an unexpected degree of control over the course structure.

Naively, it hadn't clicked that I would be meeting people, talking to people at the frontiers of their fields. The research standards at the University of Manchester had been foremost in my mind when I'd applied - yet to actually meet professional scientists was sobering. These are the people who are *conducting* the research, *writing* the papers: papers that through the months became not only approachable, not only readable but interesting. The scientists themselves were not (necessarily) peculiar and pale from time spent inhaling in

labs but inspiring and devoted. Lectures become ever more stimulating - the excitement that comes from reaching the boundaries of established knowledge is stunning.

A deciding factor in reading Biology was the job diversity available at the end of three years spent studying the living and the dead, the organic and the inorganic. At the interview welcome talk (an oxymoron more profound than military intelligence) we were promised that we would graduate from the University of Manchester more desirable for a graduate entry-level job than students of any other discipline excepting History. Quite why History graduates are so coveted remains a mystery but as biologist I am constantly discovering that my degree demands more than simply plating *Micrococcus luteus*. I did not expect to have to write a dissertation in my second year that requires me to find, study and critically analyse 50 relevant scientific papers. I did not expect to have to perform oral presentations every semester or sum-up the latest stem cell research in a newspaper article. Through planning practical experiments, I learnt time-management and team-work; there is a lot more to the new form of science degree in development of social skills than is at first apparent.

On getting to know my course-mates, my expectations suddenly went beyond finding myself in the company of like-minded sloth-enthusiasts (of the family *Bradypodidae*, not the sin) – I am meeting the professors and researchers of tomorrow. All at once the limits of proven wisdom are reached and we are presented, as adults, with conflicting theories that my generation will play a part in defining. This is a very exciting time in biology, advancements are constantly being made in understanding – and manipulating – the world in which we exist. Huge leaps in conventional knowledge will be continued by the girl who always sits on the left in lectures, or the boy across the bench in Microbiology practicals. Now that is unexpected; that is exciting.