

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

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a nineteen year old girl arriving at university, contrary to her own beliefs, has absolutely no idea what to expect<sup>1</sup>. This is true both of university life in general and of the course that one studies. Studying at degree level is so different from school study that it is really very hard to have any clear idea of what to expect. Personally, I feel I would have been hard pushed to articulate concrete ideas other than the rather vague expectation of continuing to study the area of Biology which had most interested me at school, that of human physiology. It was only really in beginning my course at university that I realised what some of my expectations had been.

First, for some unknown reason I had conceived the idea that Physiology was not a proper science. Physiology belonged to the interesting but unchallenging areas of Biology which I associated with pretty diagrams. It certainly would not require Maths or Chemistry. It was essentially the nearest Biology got to English Literature, bar perhaps anatomy. Physiology was interesting, indeed fascinating, but I did not see its relevance to cutting edge science. A proper science degree would inevitably involve genetic engineering of some sort or other, with possibly some microbiology and Agar plates thrown in.

Needless to say, the reality of studying for a physiology degree is very different. Not least because of the multidisciplinary aspect to the subject. Maths and Chemistry are essential and actively used and I have often wished for a better grasp on certain Physics principles, for instance when studying the principles of blood flow through blood vessels. The idea that physiology is not relevant to modern science is frankly, absurd; I have only to look at today's edition of The Times, featuring a frontline article on a possible cure for heart disease for confirmation.

Secondly, I think, presumptuous as it sounds, I was under the misapprehension that I actually knew a reasonable amount about Biology. At least, I thought I had a reasonable grasp of the basics of human physiology. It did not take long for me to realise that what I had learnt was really only the beginning, that simplified systems were infinitely more complicated and that I simply had not realised how much I didn't know.

One of the major differences I noticed about studying at university, which I had not expected, was that what was being studied was 'real life' physiology as supposed to idealised facts or diagrams. I distinctly remember, for instance, one of the first times I viewed a cross-section of the upper human thorax: the demonstrator pointed to two areas which he said were the lungs and asked me to identify the structure lying between them - 'The stomach?' I enquired tentatively and then noticed the aghast expression on his face.

Now, even I, with my rudimentary grasp on anatomy, am aware that the stomach does not lie between the lungs, however the point is that, when initially confronted with actual human specimens, knowledge is extremely difficult to apply- a stylised diagram of a heart is so different to the dark mass appearing on a prosection. Personally, it has been in this jump from textbook to reality where I have experienced some of the best teaching- demonstrators taking time to explain exactly what otherwise incomprehensible specimens are.

However, perhaps the thing which most took me by surprise as I began my course, was the dynamic nature of the field I was studying, the fact that it advanced, challenged and made an impact on the world around it. Previously, my idea had been of a static field of study, the answer to every question found in some dusty tomb or other. The very idea that textbooks were not infallible was in itself new. For me, this has probably been the biggest difference between my expectations and my experience of my degree. It has also been the most exciting difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Austen, J. *Pride and Prejudice*. (Konemann: Hungary, 1996) p7

Some of the teaching that I have most appreciated is that which highlights this difference; when lecturers lead you to the limit of what is currently understood and invite you to go beyond, when you participate in genuine research. This approaching the edge of knowledge in ones field is something I had not expected but is one of the most exciting things of studying physiology at university.