

“What advice would you give to students starting your course?”

It's free, it's fun, it'll change your life!

What is it? Work experience! My advice to every student starting a biosciences course is to ask for some today.

Now forget the odd week of unenthusiastically tagging along after the dry, dusty industrial placements which your school made you do. I've been there too- and it was *dull*. I won't go into it. You've chosen biology, and some of the most exciting, interesting, beautiful places in the world are itching to give you the experience of a lifetime. All you have to do is apply.

When I first found out I'd be doing a biochemistry degree I admit, I wasn't thrilled. My dream was to be a doctor and I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do. I'd studied desperately hard, done the hospital work experience, laboured for hours over my UCAS form... and then failed A-level Maths. I hadn't given the slightest bit of thought to my backup option, picking it only because it combined my two strongest subjects. This was neatly summed up on my first day at Manchester University when I asked my tutor;

“What do biochemists actually do?”

As I watched the half-disbelieving, half-horrified expression unfold over his face at the thought that anyone would commit to a three year degree without knowing what it was about, I realised I needed to sort my career aims out. I looked at the job pages in science magazines but words like bioengineer, lab technician and immunologist meant nothing to me at the time. As I was brooding on this an advert for Paignton Zoo flashed up on TV. What would it be like to actually work there? Then I decided- why not find out?

I spent a week at the zoo in my holidays and two weeks volunteering with the Eden Project. These were two of the most positive formative experiences of my life. I came face to face with an African elephant, met the people who risked everything to build one of the world's most beautiful buildings from an abandoned clay-pit and gained confidence and transferable skills, which will be with me for the rest of my life.

There are other benefits too. It can help you to decide if it's the sort of work you want to get into, and finding out its not is as important as finding out it is! Don't think if your not applying for directly related work it isn't still Cv-able. Employers look at hundreds of applicants so sometimes interesting can be more important than relevant and there are ways to *make* it relevant. For example I have since decided to go into cancer research but I still use these two work experience placements on my CV as proof of my transferable skills. Teamwork, networking, flexibility, motivation and a pro-active attitude are some of the attributes needed for and gained from successful placements which you can highlight to employers.

So beyond the obvious (labs) what's available for bioscientists? Well firstly link it to your interests. If you enjoy it I promise you'll get more out of it. For instance if you like writing why not write to scientific journals and ask if they've got space for you? If you're considering becoming a teacher why not show broader experience than classroom teaching alone on your CV be doing work experience in other educational establishments, like a natural history museum or the education department of a conservation project? Farms, aquariums, veterinary practises and television

producers are just a few of the organisations out there who offer work experience to people like you. It doesn't even need to be scientific- if want to be a manager then work experience with *any* manager is valuable not just ones from your chosen field.

If you choose to do work experience, write to more than one organisation and be prepared for rejection. Some organisations will have a standard application form but many will be perfectly happy with a letter- if you call them ahead and find out the name of the person to address the letter to this leaves a good impression. The careers service at Manchester University were fantastic in helping me with this stage. If you are rejected it's worth asking why, as it can stop you making the same mistake again. In my case the Eden Project rejected me first time around and it was only by calling to ask that I discovered it was a mistake and would I still like to go there?

So once you've got one, how to make the best of a placement? Turning up on time and tidy are the obvious two- but don't be too concerned about staying tidy! Aspects of what you are asked to do may not be what you applied for or expected. In my letter I had asked for a placement at the zoos scientific education department so I was a little surprised when I was handed a shovel and a wheel barrow and set to work on the camels!

The best reaction in a situation like that is not to question or argue but to take the scoop with a smile. After all I was there for free so they didn't exactly owe me anything! By pitching in (literally,) asking lots of questions and joining in discussions, I found out as much about the breeding programs and education delivery as I would've done working with the people doing it. It's really important not to be afraid to ask to meet particular people or to make suggestions, as they want you to have a fantastic and useful experience, but there's no way of them knowing what you want to gain from your placement if you don't tell them.

Finally the best way to round off a placement is with a thank you card and a box of chocolates in the staff room for their time and effort! Good luck!